Prisoner Express

Theme Anthology: March 2026

Letter from Jen

Hello writers!

I'm writing this in June and since the semester has just ended I'm filling in for Phoebe who will be back in the next edition. :)

Welcome to the compilation of your March 2026 word and picture prompts! I know it seems we are always behind on this, but in reality, as you can imagine, it takes a fair chunk of time to type up, compile, and edit your submissions – I hope that makes sense and explains why you see "March" a few months after the fact.

Related question: Should we update how we name the anthologies so that they're named after the month the issue is mailed rather than the month of the writing deadline? For example, if the deadline is March and the anthology is published in June, we could call it the June Anthology. (We would still of course indicate the word theme, e.g., "dogs", and the picture theme that the writings relate to). If the writing deadline is April and the anthology is published in July, it could be the July Anthology. And so on.

Would you prefer that? Or would it be more confusing? Do you have a different suggestion? Let us know when you send in your next submission.

In the meantime I hope you enjoy reading each other's work as much as we've enjoyed it.

Jen G.

Durland Alternatives Library
The Home of Prisoner Express
P.O. Box 6556, Ithaca NY 14851
(607) 255-6486
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March Word Theme: "Dogs"

***Dogs*, Charles Whitfield**

We had two dogs in my family: One was a happy-go-lucky golden lab named Tiger and the other was a collie who was a dead ringer for Lassie's brother named (believe it or hmph) – Dog.

My brother named this collie after watching a John Wayne movie where there was a dog that went with him everywhere. Tiger liked to chase birds, pee on cats, and enjoy being an all-American biscuit eater.

The collie, Dog, whenever my brother would take him out on... walks, he would be rushed by people saying "Ooh– It's Lassie!" only to be told that it was a male. The look on their faces was priceless when asked what was his name ("Dog").

As for Dog, whenever he was listening when asked what his name was, he was thinking, "Damn, I'm tired of being called 'Lassie!' 'Timmy's in trouble!' Holy Snoopy, man, it's driving me crazy! Dude, I need Prozac!"

Of course, one family pet hated the family dogs: my sister's spoiled rotten cat Heathcliff (I called him Rasputin, after the evil Russian mystic-monk). He couldn't stand Tiger and Dog strolling through the house chilling in the backyard.

They'd look at him as if they were saying, "get lost". And the cat that the devil and his angels feared the most (after the Holy Trinity and the angels), would glare, probably saying: "Hey, Jackass. #@&*! you and those fire hydrant sprayers!"

***Dogs,* Larry LaFleur**

"Mr. LaFleur, can you come in here for a second?"

I was elbow deep in a toilet, cleaning the restroom. I thought to myself, what does the doctor want now? I am an orderly in the psychology building. Usually I clean, empty trash, do dishes and once in a great while the staff will ask questions about something going on in a unit or in the yard. Today was different—MUCH different! As I washed and dried my hands and made my way towards the office, I saw a man standing there in street clothes that I had not seen before. One of his hands was down to his side and he was holding something. I could not make out what he was holding.

"Yeah, what's up doc? What do you need?"

"Come in the office," is all she said. As I stepped into the office there was—golden beauty on four legs! That is what the guy was holding, it was a leash! Instantly I sank to the floor and buried my face in the dog's soft golden fur as I caressed her head and ears. The stress, tension and chaos of daily prison life melted away. As the tears flowed down my face, I felt peace.

The doctor introduced Eric and Kimber, the therapy dog. I think I acknowledged Eric but the truth is that my attention was all on Kimber. Being able to touch a dog after three plus decades in prison—there are no words! Pure joy and calm in a place full of chaos. Now there are several dogs who make the rounds once a month or so. The joy and comfort these dogs bring cannot be measured. The unconditional love these dogs give without judgement is a balm for the weary soul. It is true, dogs can change lives!

***Dogs,* Jack Simpson**

Strolling in the woods one late summer afternoon, I had found a nice spot to sit and think. My pack had a few sandwiches, crackers, and a couple of Slim Jims. Always had a canteen of fresh water to get me through.

I just finished a Slim Jim and a sandwich. Picked up my trash and placed it in my pack. Down the path where it would lead me I did not know. Twenty minutes into the walk, picked up an odor I know too well. Something was dead ahead of me. The smell was getting stronger.

In less than fifty yards I found four dogs that had been shot and left to die. The one that I thought might still be alive was also dead. This broke my heart, that a person could do that to helpless animals. Not even humans should be treated like this.

This bothered me so bad, I cut the tags from their collars. I know they had to belong to someone. I returned early the next day with a shovel and my pack with food and water. I buried the four together, deep enough for them to get the proper rest and even placed a few stores at their heads. Said a small prayer, finished and headed home again.

At the vet's office, we located the owners of the dogs. Their tags were returned and an investigation was issued. It took a couple of months before results were found. The people involved were punished and fired from their jobs. Let's just say the dog catcher had to reimburse the owners and now had to pick trash up along the highway. He is not allowed to even own a dog.

Thank God for animal rights and human rights. Hang tight dogs.

***My Lost Syn*, Jacob Lester**

Companions come and go, but their impact upon you never fades. What many have discovered is the joys that a dog can bring into your life. Each one is unique and special just like each of the breeds. Each one has his or her own personality and will often bond to the owner/ companion as closely as a child/friend/partner. Then if the worst ever does occur, agony, sorrow and loss can fill your very soul.

From eight weeks old, I raised my dear Syn. A chihuahua-terrier so small that she fits in my hoodie pocket. Black, white and tan, she was small and adorable. From the start I would take her to work with me. Her visits with the elderly residents cheered them up, bringing a brilliant light to their day, providing them entertainment different from the normal day to day.

Quickly she grew and grew until a year later, she weighed over twenty pounds. Tall and energetic she was a bundle of energy that could brighten the gloomiest of days.

Then a mistake I made, getting caught up in only Lord knows what. Upon my
arrest, animal control took my Syn away to heaven only knows where. Lost to me, she is, and often still I wonder what her fate has been. A pain and agony that still rears its head.

***Bitch,* Desaree Levingson**

When I think about dogs, I am reminded of what people would call a bitch. I have some news for them. A bitch is a female dog. A dog barks, bark is part of a tree, a tree is a part of nature, and nature is beautiful.

My whole life I was called this name until I found out its true meaning. So when people call me this name, all I have to remember is that they are actually calling me beautiful.

Thank you to all the people who try to take me down with this word. Now I know the truth, I am beautiful.

***Kodi*, Gary Farlow**

Kodi was my brother Philip's purebred Siberian husky. Startling blue eyes and a demeanor that brought to life an old adage of a dog's bark being worse than his bite. In fact, I never actually heard Kodi bark. His gentleness belied a fierce appearance.

With an affinity for Cool Whip, Kodi was loved by everyone. He was never intrusive, but would quietly make his presence known at the dinner table by resting his chin upon your knee as if to say, *hey, I'm here. Can I have a bite too?*

When offered a table scrap, Kodi would carefully take the food from your fingers, never allowing his sharp teeth to touch flesh. I've never known a dog like him.

To be such a large dog, he was not rambunctious, but possessed a countenance of benign complacency, never growling, barking, or demanding.

At my brother's home in a rural area, Kodi had the freedom to run and roam. All the neighbors knew and loved him as Kodi was a frequent "guest" to any outdoor barbecue, pool party, or ice cream social. Kodi preferred his burgers medium-rare, his ice cream with whipped topping – hold the fudge sauce – and loved nothing better than chasing a soccer ball, tennis ball, beach ball, anything really.

When my brother bought a new home in the city, Kodi's days of roaming came to an end. Never one to complain, anyone could plainly see the forlorn look of misery as this dog with such a humanlike nature would stand in the sunroom staring out upon the manicured lawn and flowerbeds – places he could not have his usual free reign.

It soon became painfully obvious that the new home was no home for Kodi. Parting with a pet, as any owner will attest, is akin to parting with a member of the family. My brother knew, as much as it was going to hurt, he had to do what was best for Kodi.

The drive back to the former home was all too short. A call to old neighbors was met with eager shouts of "Yes!" They wanted Kodi and would provide a welcoming, loving home with room to romp. As my brother drove away, having deposited Kodi with his new family, he saw in the rearview mirror Kodi standing, staring after the vehicle as if to question, *hey, wait for me.* Phillip heard a squeal of "c'mon, Kodi!" and the dog was off, chasing a delighted throng of kids playing soccer. Kodi had come home.

***Man's Best Friend*, Joseph Colon**

Dogs are wonderful creatures! They love you unconditionally. They don't care if you're a murderer, rapist, drug pusher, or the worst piece of shit in the world. All you have to do is feed them and show them a little interest and they'll follow you to the ends of the Earth.

I was a dog trainer at my last prison for five years. I taught them a little and they taught me a lot. Learning how to take care of them helped me learn how to take care of myself. Learning about them helped me learn about myself.

Now I've seen people beat their dogs yet the dog doesn't distrust or rescind his loyalty. I've seen dogs abused and betrayed yet they forgive like nothing ever happened. In some ways…. hell… in a lot of ways, dogs are better than people.

They don't judge, criticize, or argue. They don't yell, complain or drink your last beer (unless you let them). They don't bitch if you don't vacuum or wash your dishes, they just sit there and wait. Waiting for that pat on the head or gentle scratch behind the ears or belly. There for you to love and allow to bring joy into your life. That is why I believe they are man's best friend, unconditionally.

***Not Man's Best Friend,* Sarah Miller**

I love dogs. They are my spirit animal. However I've learned that not all of them are man's best friend. I've come into contact with quite a few K-9s who hit on my ride in spots where drugs definitely were not. For instance they alert on the trunk when the shit's in the cooler in the front seat. LSD doesn't even have a smell! Or the dogs don't alert at all and there are a couple pounds of weed in a duffle bag in the backseat. Seriously, talk about shitting your pants!

My scariest experience with Not Man's Best Friend was at the San Francisco Airport in 2021. I was flying back to Florida with shit in my luggage. They had a section in the line before the X-ray where you had to walk two by two through a part of the line with your luggage. A TSA dude ran a dog in front and behind you.

I freaked out! I called Troy, my ex and now my co-defendant, and told him I was catching another flight from Oakland. Forget this! I was sure I was going down flaming. It took a huge amount of convincing and an argument for him to convince me they were bomb dogs not drug dogs.

I put my best bored face on and got back in the line and rolled my bag past the dog. Either my carbon-lined suitcase was working or Troy was right.

***Dogs,* Terry Olney**

I wish I were a dog.

Most people like dogs and won't go out of their way to be mean to them or hurt them.

Most people will go out of their way to help or comfort it, if they see a dog alone that's cold, hungry, or scared. Either with kind, gentle words or giving it food or taking it home to bring it into their family or getting it to a shelter.

And even when it's there in the shelter and no one wants the poor thing still, at least they will do the ultimate kindness and end its suffering with euthanization rather than keep it locked up alone, unwanted and unloved.

God I wish I were a dog!

***Dogs,* Tyler Ulm**

So dogs that I have had over the 31 years I've been alive have been two full-blooded Saint Bernards, two dachshunds, one full-blooded Dalmatian that I named Pongo and one black lab Australian shepherd chow mix named Holly.

So I don't remember the first dachshund (Sammy) or how Pongo acted due to the extensive head trauma I have had. The first that I do remember is Sherman aka Tank due to his massive size. He was the first of two Saint Bernards I had gotten when I was 3 or 4 and we had him until I was about 9. At that point, he was bigger than normal and when I was 8 I remember that I would let him in the house at night and he would climb into bed and cover me up with his fur. To me he was a life-sized teddy bear until someone got close to me or my younger sister, then he was all bear.

Now my Hidi was the second Saint Bernard I had from 11 until I was 14. She was a baby and had to sleep with me under the covers and have her head on the pillows. The last two dogs that I had were the second dachshund, Winston, who was mixed with terrier and then Holly, the lab mix. I had them from 2015 until 2018 when I got arrested and my dad had them until he had to put Holly down at 15 because she had gotten sick and was not able to get better. But I can still remember her and Winston and how they would go everywhere together and get into everything as a pair.

Now with all of the dogs I had, it did not matter how long I was gone or if I had yelled at them before I had left. All they cared about when I got home was "Oh hi you're back I missed you. Now play with me." As well as when I needed emotional support they were there for me. So my fur babies will always hold a special place in my heart.

***Dogs*, Karla Wooten**

A popular singer likes to say that he's a dog. He's a mutt.
I'm not sure why he thinks that being a mutt is cute. When the song gets to that part I cringe because he can sing, but all the songs that we hear today are auto-tune.
Cameo's lead singer used to sing about why it must be like that, why just I chase the cat, that it's nothing but the dog in me.
Women like that. But, I can do without the mutt, the producer should have said—Cut!
I love a man who doesn't have to say a word…when he looks at my body, it understands and has heard his call, his whisper, and seen his stare. I love a man where it is a joy and a pleasure to hear his voice and to see his face.
Baby, you don't have to be a mutt cause this cat slays all day, every day.
All you have to be is the dog that chases the cat-omen like it just like that!

***Dogs,* Michael Blackburn**

Hey there, man's best friend,
who knows no end to their love.
Those who go ahead of us
so we may not get struck by a mourning dove
Y'alls only purpose is to remind us of how to love
And just how much we all need a friend
till the end
then we transcend to become on the receiving end
to another longing loose-end in need of tightening up
by this pup
Each helping the other to grow up
Spending each night curled up next to the cold cup
of dried up tears
just look at these dog-ears
So much cheer that it is clear that
you are here to help steer us into a new year.

Hey there, man's best friend.
Who else would God send?
But someone that does not offend
you do not pretend to be a friend.
Just ask that we lend a hand
so that you may go out to the sands
to dominate the land.
If you could make a band,
it would be called the Dog Band land.
Calling all you dogs.
Calling all you dogs.
Quickly, coming running like hogs.
For there is no fog to hide your analogs.
Show us how to be top dogs.
That we can put it in our logs.

Hey there man's best friend
whose love knows no end.

***Dogs*, Burton Clark**

Here, I'm sitting at trial
Wondering all the while
Will they set me free
Or just another tease?

My life is in their hands

Back in jail
Maybe I'll get bail

I could have made bail
But a little female
Cried no, no, no
I fear him so

He might kill me
My mother and dog

I loved that little hound.

***The Relationship of Dogs*, Gardner LaMarche**

A dog is often considered to be man's greatest friend. And to me, a dog is an animal. And animals are rather fascinating to me, although I do not carry the same regard for them as that of a human being. Dogs always remind me of the wild when I see them and I usually consider them as being in the forest. Yes I do think that a dog could be a tremendous relation to have and to share, they are beautiful creatures and they truly reflect the freedom of nature. I also carry a great affection for the city and what cultures we have designed within societies. My mind is a tremendous gift that is greater than myself. And this greatness compels me to pursue what the city is made of because of the city's numerous relations. They say that a dog is man's best friend, and the diamond is a woman's. And I truly consider how much greater our fascinations would be if man's greatest affection was intended for, the woman that shares with him, the city. My deepest dream is to worship this life with a woman. Because in the light of her relation her being becomes the Christ to me. By drawing closer to our intellects, the ominous source of creation becomes a clear message, and inevitably the gift of the woman, my deepest possession. So the dog is a wonder of what nature that the life has. It makes me wonder about other harmonies. There is great peace in the dog's relationship. The challenges of the city are more attractive to my spirit.

***Dogs,* Jackie Moorehead**

My family has always had house dogs, some were small in stature, while others were large in stature. My first memory of a dog was a Cocker spaniel named Curlie. My mother told me that Curlie had mysteriously appeared at our back door as a puppy one cold winter morning, and she had fed Curlie with an eye dropper until he was big enough to eat table scraps and dog food.

When I was six years old in late 1956, I received my first puppy that was given to me for a birthday present from my first grade teacher.

I had to crawl on my hands and knees while my back rubbed on the flooring of my teacher's house. There was not enough room for me to turn around in between the floor joists so I had to back out with a puppy in one hand and a flashlight in the other. I had to crawl under the floor and back out three times, because the first two puppies were females. It was about a twenty-foot one-way trip in and back out. When I reached in and grabbed a puppy, the mother dog would lick my hand and she did the same thing when I put the puppies back with her, except she would also lick the puppy. She even licked my hand when I finally retrieved the male puppy. Which my mother named Taffie because of his Taffy color coat of medium-length hair.

In the spring of 1960, we had a river overflow its banks and Curlie drowned in his and Taffie's kennel, but Taffie swam for about six hours and survived the ordeal.

After Curlie drowned, my two sisters inherited a puppy each, which made three house dogs. The other two dogs were about the same stature as a dachshund. One was a male named Little Joe. He had a medium-length black and brown coat of hair, while the other dog was a female, her name was Ladie. She had a short length, black and white coat of hair, whereas Taffie was a hound/collie mix and had the stature of a German shepherd.

All three dogs were house broken and had the run of our family house and the local neighborhood. There was no leash law in the countryside of West Virginia. But the dogs were put in a large kennel at night and were fed table scraps mixed with warm water, which was their dog food in the kennel.

My dad and mother had to put Taffie outside whenever they would spank one of us children because Taffie was very protective of me and my sisters.

My dad was a superintendent of a large hardwood lumber saw mill. He worked ten to twelve hours a day. He would come home after work and sit down in the recliner and drift off to sleep. Taffie would usually lay down next to the recliner and sleep. Every once in a while Taffie would break wind, he would sniff at his tail end, sit up and go outside. My dad would be awakened by the dog's stench and cuss and swear that Taffie had done it again on purpose. But wherever we went on vacation, all three dogs came with us because my dad would build a special dog house and/or apartment for the dogs to ride in, and our luggage would be put in a luggage carrier on top of the car. Because the

dog's apartment would usually be built in the trunk of the car.

I also love hearing the raccoon hound dogs as they are pursuing the raccoon through the mountains and valleys and up and down the hollers of Southern West Virginia. When the hound dogs change the pitch of their bark, you know the raccoon has escaped up a tree and/or the raccoon has been treed. Then the raccoon hunters have to follow the sound of the hound-dogs barking (baying) to retrieve their hound dogs and/or shoot the raccoon out of the tree.

***Dogs,* Kelly Messenger**

Dogs...lol...I'm not an animal but I do be dogging the fuck out of people in here. Both staff and some of these women. And you know what? They deserve it. It's like they be asking for it. Provoking me and constantly fucking with me. I just be wantin' to chill, you know what I'm sayin', but its hard as fuck to chill around a bunch of hateful ass hoes that are constantly prayin' on my downfall. It's like they purposely fuck with me, like they beggin' me to get another case in here. Everyone knows I get real "Dangerous" that's why I'm pretty much the only one who has to live in a cell by myself in closed custody. On top of that when I go the fuck off because I'm locked behind a door, everyone wants to fall over laughin' and say "Tee-He-He, I'm dead." It really makes me mad as fuck because I swear I just survived a 4 year long death wish that damn near the whole facility had on me. People are committin' suicide in here left and right, and I swear more than anything they wanted it to be me. They still out here playin' hang-man like ruthless ass KKK members. Just so both staff and prisoners can brag that they are in heat. They can't handle it that I'm white and I can hold my own, and that I actually am the hardest prisoner/most dangerous in this facility. But I won't die. I really just wanna chill and eat my food peacefully like I used to before I came here, and make it home one day. I still can't get immune to these women, their evil hormones and the way they eat, its turning me into a fucking demon.

***Converted Breeding*, D'Andre Morris**

I always thought wolves looked like dogs. I knew the two were in the same family tree. I found it astonishing that dogs are the original breed from wolves.

I wonder, what technique of breeding birthed dogs. Was it a donor, was it science? How were dogs able to sustain their bloodline? Not to mention their abundant variety of species.

That gets me thinking about the kittens (house cat) and the big cats. Were they breeding births, such as wolves?

Biology has a great breakdown of the living systems. Of how and what. I believe if it was done genetically, altering breeding, wolves and felines, it could have been done to get humans. Who are we?

***Dogs,* Bert Zamora**

Dogs. A man's best friend.
I have had many dogs in my lifetime. All of them good dogs.
I have had Black Labs, Fox Terriers, Dalmations, Cocker Spaniels,
Rottweilers, Papillons, Shitzapoos, and a mix of mutts.
I loved each and every one of those dogs with my whole heart.
They were all like brothers and kids to me.
The dogs were bought, rescued, given, inherited, and found to come into my life and my family's lives.
I can still remember most of their names:
Teddy, Jazz, Rainbow, Banjo, Popcorn Jacko, Lorinda, Meatball Bo, Luke,
Daisy, Peanut, Tubby, Tiny, and Missy.
They were friends who slept in the same bed.
Licked my face, took rides and vacations with me.
They protected me from danger and sadness.
A dog is truly man's best friend.
You watch them grow, learn, and teach in their short lives.
Time with them feels so short but they make a big impact on us.
I just hope each one knows how much I loved each one of them.

***Dogs,* Nicholas Wilborn**

Over the years, I've owned or lived in homes with dogs. Some of the dogs were mine; others were family members' dogs. Regardless of the case, I played with or took care of these dogs.

The first dog I remember having was a mutt named Hot Shot. I remember being 3 or 4 years old. I don't remember playing with Hot Shot but being afraid of him (I say him, but Hot Shot could've just as easily been her). I can't tell you how or even when he died, but I was glad.

The next dogs to arrive came as puppies. No matter where they came from or how they arrived, man, I loved those two dogs. Lady was my dog. Tom was my brother's. We had those dogs for years. I'll never forget the day she died. It was a Sunday morning. I went out to feed Tom and Lady. Usually, when the back door opened, they would come running. Not today, though. I stepped to the side of the house, and there they were. Lady was lying down, head turned sideways, obviously not breathing, eyes open. Tom was right there, stretched out, head resting on his paws, just looking at her. Immediately, I started crying. I was maybe 10 or so. I told my mom, who was fixing breakfast. She called my dad, then she, my dad, my brother and I all went outside. My mother and I cried. We didn't bury her in the backyard like you see in TV shows. My dad, with tears in his eyes, scooped Lady in his arms and took her away. My dad later speculated that it was a splintered chicken bone from last night's dinner that did Lady in. From that day on, we never fed chicken bones to our dogs. Tom stuck around for several years afterwards until he got out the fenced yard, never to be seen again. By then my brother was at least 18 or 19 and had other pursuits to occupy his time.

I never got another dog, nor did I want one. My mom has owned several dogs since then. I fed and cleaned up after one. She named him Fluff. Once she went out of town to a church conference so my dad and I had to take care of Fluff. I'll never forget my dad's words as my mom walked out the door! "Man, fuck a Fluff." I still smile at those words. My wife and step kids owned 3 at one time. I still felt nothing for any of them.

Needless to say, I never loved, let alone allowed myself to care for any other pet or dog like I did for Lady ever again. I even tried owning turtles and fish. Nothing could replace Lady. When Lady died that day, a part of me died with her.

***Sammy and Clover*, Jeff Hovatter**

Prison has exposed me in totality. To me, I am not at all impressed. The endless hours of introspection have left no illusions. I now see the good, and bad, of myself.

My childhood of ignorance and poverty shaped me into the man I became, and in turn, despite my best effort and intention, those I was responsible for. American culture and society rewards financial success, and lack of money severely limits the opportunities available. Even if one has good capability, a lack of finances denies the means to gain information. Dollars define the boundaries of all dimensions of your world.

Basic education was mine due to government policy. How the world works, and the myriad of possibilities in it have only begun to come to me late in life. Too late.

Jim Crow lives in prison. The euphemism "inmate" is used vs. "colored" (at least for now). Experiencing this admittedly mild version of prejudicial treatment has opened my eyes to cruelty in society. Whether due to racism or financial status prejudice is an ugly human trait that I resist with fair success. I put this in the "good" column of my traits, along with my generosity and empathy.

I am a haunted man. My days and nights are weighed down by memories of all my failures, and ironically, the successes as well. It seems all my memories are poisoned when seen through my unblinking prisoner's eyes. Ignorance passed down from the hardscrabble community of my youth led to many poor decisions as an adult. From a culture of school being an unwelcome chore, to never missing work due to a hangover, to no one is better than you. I internalized values that misled me at times. Many (most) of my poor choices were failures of omission rather than commission. Being exposed to oppression has helped me see things I should have done.

My girlfriend had a cat. I had a cat. Well, my cat had me. She just moved in, leaving a

neighborhood family to live with me. Years later, my then wife and young daughter chose puppies from a litter born to another neighbor family. "Dogs live outdoors" was a hard rule in my Dad's house. Nearly all dogs lived on a chain in the area of my childhood. Food, shelter, and occasional romps, or better, hunts, were theirs. With two puppies to care for, I provided a snug doghouse with straw bedding and a fenced run of about 500 square feet.

I failed to teach them to hunt or obey. They did work out on their own how to get along, and became very good watchdogs, being useful in that manner. They took readily to a leash, and trotted, one on each side of the front wheel of my bicycle, which I didn't teach them.

I bought a farm with room to allow them to be unconfined. Again they soon worked out on their own to alert us if a car came through our gate 300 yards from the house. They kept predators away from the chickens and relished any chance to kill a groundhog.

Sweetly gentle with people, but unpredictably aggressive, a few times, with dogs brought by visitors. They lived twenty years, and I was devastated by grief when they died.

As a kid I had a large extended family and learned from the older kids. My parents kept us housed and fed against terrible odds. Much information on child care either didn't exist, or was beyond reach for the working poor. The dogs, my wife and daughter had lived pretty much as prisoners, due to my lack of knowledge and pursuit of "success" financially. My daughter, an only child, learned to train the dogs to obey basic voice and hand signals, and she suffered due to my ignorance and failure to define success properly as well.

My priority in life was work. The poorest choice in a lifetime of poor choices. My heart was in the right place, I certainly loved them all, but failed to pass my love and knowledge to those who needed me. Guilt and remorse hurt me with any thought of the loved ones I lost, just as intended by the prison system, and as deserved by me, perhaps.

Sammy and Clover were hardy, medium-sized, mixed breed dogs. Intelligent, capable, and good natured. I mourn them and my failure to them. They, like myself, only could know what they had opportunity to learn.

***Year of the Dog*, Jason Centrone**

Dogs? So glad you asked. The rascals overtook my last two terms—a research assistant, it was either dogs, or (you will laugh) guinea pigs. The piggy study (you won't laugh) entailed dispatching each subject for the blood draw…spare you the details, but a hearty no.

Dogs, though—could it be? Some human contact (doggy massage, basically) with a little behavioral training (lots of treats) could reduce the standing stress level of dogs in captivity (shelters)? Yes. The study results were statistically significant. And the animals—irresistable. A joy.

Depressing, too—unlike these places, anyone working in a shelter begins planning immediately—the adaptation of 97% of the penned population. Always a few grumps no one wants. Sad but true.

Then the real heart-stomps (you knew this was coming)—we've seen the ASPCA ads. Shivering, lonely, sick, rotting, starving, the broken-down animals. All true—shot dogs, imbedded collar dogs, sun-stroked dogs, dog-fought dogs…the worst cases—the unadoptables, I would watch, a somber knot, their lethal injections, and was often out on the grounds walking research animals by the time they hit the crematorium; noxious black plumes off the fur going up. Sad but true.

Annie—cream & cocoa-flecked hunting mix, and dogs like her, I can tell you, entirely offset the lows of shelter life. Just so personable—sweet & smart—blew through her training like no other. Are there old soul dogs? I say yes. I say to anyone getting out, find your local shelter. Volunteer! Rediscover heart parts you didn't know were missing.

***Nyu,* Bonnelle Vang**

Her name was Nyu (Ñu).
She was a little rascal, always seeking approval.
But I was never big on owning pets; I knew and believed myself to be too irresponsible. But my sister, Nancy, found her at a park near her school. "What should we name him?" she asked, but the dog was clearly female. I can't tell you which breed she was, but she was small—calf-high with pointy ears and a nice snout. I named her Nyu, which everyone immediately
liked—it was just me, Nancy, and my own cousin Franky.
That comes from the Hmong word for cow (the same for beef or cow meat), which her fur resembles. The black and white pattern was plastered on smooth and rough hide. She needed a scrubbing, which Nancy gave—but Nyu jumped around too much in the tub.
But our mom wouldn't let us keep her.
I wasn't particularly heart-broken, I spent my time in and at school studying, for some faraway dream. Thankfully, I didn't attach myself even if mom formed a relationship of sorts. My time wasn't meant for any pet—I realized that with
All the dead goldfish, turtles, and birds. Nancy and Franky, both younger, seemed reluctant to return her, but off she went into the neighborhood wild.
That was fifteen years ago.
How to survive a cold cruel world that doesn't want you?

***Dogs*, by Ron Stark**

I'm a "dog person," not that I dislike cats, but let's face it…dogs are cool. Dogs will show you how much they love and appreciate you…cats show you how much you'll love and appreciate them. Dogs win…no contest.

The Bible tells us that God is love. True. But is it a coincidence that the spelling of dog is God backwards? Dog(s) is (are) love.

Many of the "love attributes" of God are manifested in dogs. I don't intend to list them or preach, but if you've had a dog, you know how unconditional the love is toward the owner.

Read DOG books (*Marley & Me, Ol' Yeller, Beautiful Joe*, etc.) and know how dogs are: medicine, help for the distressed and depressed, finders of hidden inner body diseases (i.e., cancer), providers of solace, and great companions.

Dogs are love. Look at the interactions of kids and dogs. Look at how a dog responds to a baby (cats just walk away).

Dogs communicate through a series of vocal intonations and body language. (I'd love to share how smart my two dogs were but 800 words limits that and I've just used 22 words!)

If you've owned or interacted with a dog, you know what they're capable of.

This I know: I truly miss my two dogs (Maxx and Snow)—the best people I've ever met.

***"Dogs"*, Marcus Alfredo Flores**

In the latter portions of my life I have become indifferent about the company that I keep. Namely dogs.

It is said that the dog is a man's best friend. Though I have my scruples regarding this statement allow me a moment of crass pessimism.

I don't buy into the image of a dog licking the child's ice cream for the child to turn around and lick that same ice cream. Sure they can be loyal and comforting at times but being in the youth of my thirties I could care less about the goings and the comings of this pet. You have to train it and raise it like a child. It defecates on the living room floor and grabs a hold of your hat, you know, that beautiful Stetson you used to go hiking in.

Dogs are overrated attention junkies. And what of the one that howls all night and it's really become an issue because purple blotches have begun to be noticeable beneath your eyes but we just endure these discomforts. I'm a man of many woes. Can somebody save me from partaking in this psychotic friend fest. Dogs. And I scoff.

***Dogs,* Christian Hansen**

I've always been told that a "Dog is Man's Best Friend." In my life that hasn't held very true. Don't get me wrong, I don't see dogs as bad creatures. I see bad owners and animal instincts.

My earliest memory of "owning" (do we ever truly own an animal?) a dog, was at the age of four or five. He was given to me as a birthday present, which just happens to be in December. Bo was a very handsome Golden Retriever. I named him Bo because I was obsessed with "The Dukes of

Hazzard" back then. The sad and traumatic part of having Bo was on the third day, when the previous owners stole him back. They believed we were abusing Bo by putting him out in the snow to go potty.

Shortly after losing Bo, we got a wonderful little black poodle. We named her Muffin—so cute that you could just eat her up. Once again, I witnessed trauma when a neighborhood (full grown) Black Lab decided to come into our yard and mate with Muffin. In the process of trying to break them up, the lab attacked my mother by biting deep into the calf of her leg. Muffin went on to deliver a few pups but she was damaged internally. Now Muffin is long gone. "All Dogs Go to Heaven" you know.

I also had a small dog named "Suzie-Q". She was a little fur-ball of black and white. She was the mix of a Shih Tzu and Maltese. A gift from one of my mom's co-workers (the dog lady), "Grandma Rosa-Lee". I feel we were able to provide a much better environment for Suzie-Q. Rosa-Lee had too many dogs to share her love with.

It was shortly after these dogs that I found out just how far the love of my parents extended. I found out that, at an early age, my father had been bitten by a dog. His trauma was so great that even the mention of a dog would trigger a seizure. I didn't realize my desire for a dog was causing him health issues. So from that point on we became a cat household. I would just admire and visit my friend's and family's households to get my doggie fix. This has kinda been a thing in my life, visiting other places to get my fixes—when life couldn't meet my needs itself.

There are a few dogs I've met throughout my life that stand out in my memory. One of which was "Buster". He was a beautiful mix of Irish-Setter, Dalmatian, and Lab. When he'd get wet you'd see his spots show up. Unfortunately, we had to put him down following my uncle's departure (his owner). My uncle was a real bad drug addict and would get Buster "stoned" also. My uncle did Buster wrong and the drugs were only part of the issue.

Another dog that stands out in my (and my daughter, Elizabeth's) life is "Red". Red was a very solid Golden Retriever. I do believe I was told the technical breed was called a "King Golden Retriever". All I know is he had quite the lion's mane around his face. He is another "family member" who has passed since I came to prison. In 2021, Red was walking across the street, to go to the bathroom, when he collapsed in the street. After taking him to the vet, Red had to receive the shot to take the pain away for good. Of all my dogs, he's the only one I still have a picture of here. I do believe it is the only one that still exists in my life because I think even my picture of "Queenie" is gone.

So my fellow readers, please tell me about your four-legged friends.

***Sixteen (for Dice),* Dustin Miller**

You would have been sixteen today if death had not parted us. My heart would be absent a scar, which was once a wound that I barely survived. There is no cost I would not pay, nor anything I wouldn't do to have you back in my arms again. What could we do with just one more day together? I would force myself to take you out into the world where you could see, and interact with, people and animals. I would not want to share you, but I would do it because I am your daddy, and it is my job to lead you into joy. Watching you interacting with the world would remind me what perfection is, and seeing you shine would heal the place in my soul which fear and anger have broken. Every divine moment spent in your presence would imbue me with greater strength and resolve. Until I was your soulmate, I was a boy, with a boy's concerns and resources. I became a man when you taught me to love, and be present, and to celebrate life by spending it nourishing the best parts of me, by letting your love cultivate them in ways I could never have imagined, or accomplished alone. As terrifying as loving you was, it made me brave.

I knew the first time that I looked at you, that I belonged to you, and that we would spend forever together. I knew that it was my job to protect you, and, in doing that, discovered that it was a two way street. Every effort I made in service to you built me up a hundredfold, until I was all I wanted to be. It amazes me that I was anybody before I was yours. It feels like another lifetime, trying to remember my world before you. Everything up to that moment was practice. Every injury, loss, and disappointment, molded in me a space that was exactly in your shape, which allowed you to complete me when we met.

Though I was unfamiliar then with the sensation of belonging, I knew, beyond all doubt, the first time our eyes met, that I had a place in the world. Within me there was a rush of fear, a sudden desire to possess you , and to be possessed by you. The terror of loving you was

only eclipsed by the terror of losing you. Love is expensive. Life is fragile... temporary. Moments pass. Then years. Then lifetimes. What lives beyond those moments carries what is left of us into the future, through the lives, memories, and imaginations of those we have touched with our presence. In this way, you and I have never been parted, and never will be. Though I cannot hold you in my mortal arms, nothing and nobody can dislodge you from my immortal soul, and everything I am, or ever will be, is because you unlocked my broken heart, and brought me back to life. Every color I see, every sound I hear, every song I hum, every urge or belief I possess, which drives me toward kindness, and bravery, and hope– is because you took the broken pieces my skeleton was built around and exhumed, then resurrected me.

You are my hope. You are my hero. You are my son. You are the best of all things, and being your dad was, and always will be, the greatest privilege, and most important joy in my life. I am me because of you. I love you forever. Your love stills, warms and shields me across the expanse of time and space, and I feel the living joy of you resonating, like music in a film, in the chambers of my heart. Oh my God– how I adore you, my beautiful son! No matter how long I live, or how soon I die, I will never doubt the immaculate beauty in which we all reside, because you were here to guide me into the wild mystery of love, and there is no loss with power enough to remove, or tarnish that gift. I am so lucky that you were mine, and I will always, always be yours. No matter where we go, or what we become, I will never leave you, or forget you. You are my heart, and you are an unextinguished miracle, compelling me to seek a life in the service of loving, and healing. You are the best parts of me, and I promise to do everything in my power to share your love with every lonely soul I meet. I know that is what you would want.

Save a place for me if there is something after this, and I promise I will find you.

Happy Birthday Sweetheart,

Love,
Daddy

***Paranormal Pet Connections*, Jonathan Holeman**

People are generally not meant to live alone. Some however tend to find life more agreeable without the distractions of others. For some of those, it is often the friendship of animals that tends to fill any gaps. Ample research has been developed that can easily prove this point. Even in religion we often find the great importance of our relationships with animals. More often we, humans, have a capacity to believe that animals are here for us, as food, or perhaps we are to be the caretakers of animals? As more thought and studies are done, however, it begins to come clear that animals might hold a much greater significance as our protectors. Dogs, which live closer to human beings than any other animals in our current times, have much more to offer, than the mere capacity of a simple pet.

According to veterinarian Doug Knueven, it is a spiritual connection that explains the benefits of sharing life with animals (Venture Inward, Winter 2021, "Our Pets Are a Part of the Family Too"). In the same article Knueven explains that he has witnessed phenomena where a dog will take on physical maladies of its caregiver.

Scientist Rupert Sheldrake explains hundreds of cases of animals displaying spiritual connections with their owners through a phenomenon he calls "Morphic fields," ("Dogs That Know When Their Owners are Coming Home", year unknown). Is it these morphic fields that allow pets to know when their owners are sick? If these morphic fields are a form of communication between mankind and animals, is it a form of empathy or something far more remarkable?

Some believe these spiritual connections can relieve a human in distress, improve social integration between children and those on the autistic spectrum with other humans. A number of such scientific studies research can be found at the website HABRI.org. Such research has also shown a significant percentage increase in the general attitude, well being, and multitude of positive impacts whenever dogs have been integrated into various hospital and prison programs. If the mere presence of dogs can improve health, and even cause violent prisoners to be more productive and calm, then what are the possibilities?

Even biblically we find God creating animals of every kind, then giving mankind dominion over them (Genesis, Chapter 1). In Odinist/Ausatru belief systems we find all the gods and mankind in a

constant give-and-take spiritual relationship with all manner of animals. Native American culture, African Nok culture, Shintoism, and every known modern and ancient spiritual belief system has various stories showing the importance of our companionship with animals. If all religions show this, why then is it difficult for so many people to see the need for further research into this spiritual connection?

Animals are not just here for mankind to eat. Nor are they simply here for our amusement. What if the key to all of our most bizarre paranormal questions has been right there in front of us, our entire lives? Dogs, since they have lived so close to us, can sense our moods, our illnesses. They even might know when our 'lives' are near to end. Personally I would argue that we are not intended to protect animals, but that they are meant to protect us. This protection spans past our current realm of understanding.

It simply became a choice then. A matter of faith. Is it easier to have faith in our government, our society, the stranger walking down the street, or in your most loyal friend?

Have you ever had dreams of your dog, or other pet? Have you ever felt angry or full of sorrow, then found your pet approaching you with a compassion that far surpasses any human attempt at connection?

Our dogs, our "pets", are far more important than anything inside our physical plane of existence. All the answers might lay right at our feet, if only we found the ability to span that gap in communication. Instead, we carry on, making machines that very likely will replace us.

***Dogs*, Yankee Lawyer**

A dog is a canine animal related to the gray wolf. In addition to natural races, human breeders have developed many breeds of dog.

Some dogs are bred for hunting, some for herding, some for other purposes.

Some traits humans look for are unnatural. They would not make a dog more fit to survive in the wild.

Some traits are accidental byproducts of selective breeding. Often, they are linked to more important traits. A hound's ridiculously large and floppy ears do not enhance his hearing or his ability to control his body temperature. They are a result of human breeders' desire for intelligent but servile animals. Some genes that tend to produce alpha males are on the same chromosome as genes for governing the size, shape and control of outer ears. So modern hounds are docile, dependent, intelligent and good at following scents, but their hearing suffers.

Besides canine animals, the word "dog" is often used pejoratively to refer to a human being. This insult can be traced back to biblical times.

After King Ahab of Israel was struck by a Syrian archer's arrow, the dogs of Samaria licked up his blood. Assyrians liked to cut up pieces of prisoners of war and feed them to their dogs. So we know that, although dogs were valued as farm animals and pets, their relationships with humans were less cordial and stable then than they are today.

In fact, the word "dog" in the Old Testament commonly refers to male cult prostitutes. They worked in the temple and synagogues and performed essentially the same functions as female prostitutes, but their customers were often women.

Under some kings dogs were honored and respected. They helped to encourage men to attend religious services. Occasionally, a reform-minded king would have them slaughtered.

***Dogs*, Vinicio J. Garcia**

TV dogs Rin Tin Tin and Lassie – even as a kid I thought the stories were lame.

Eddie on Frazier was well done. Asta in the Thin Man series—Shane—gotta love him.

Inept at caring for dogs, I raised two puppies who had a run of the countryside in Austin by Lake Travis – they were killed by water moccasins in 1975. Also, one of the stupidest things and to this day I have no clue why I did it—was buy a pure bred dog show Siberian Husky. It cost $350—a lot of money in 1975—$50 a week. It was beautiful—his name was Fjord Land Satanic Imp. I lived on the outskirts of Austin by Bergstrom AFB—it was stolen two weeks after I got him.

Attacked by a beautiful pure white German Shepherd at St. Ed's in Austin in 1972.

Attacked by a Rottweiler in West Arlington around 195 while jogging.

Attacked by a mutt in Irving around 1987 while jogging.

Stalked by a pack of wild dogs around Nov 1974 while mushroom hunting in Littleton outside of Austin.

Saw my first dog grins on four mutts in Brownsville in 1965 after they knocked me off my bicycle.

Stopped a fight between 4 pit bulls by hitting them one at a time on the back of the neck with the flat side of a 2x4. It was about 1982 in Abilene.

Couldn't save a German Shepherd that was running across a main street in South Austin in 1974—he had made it 5 lanes and was hit right in front of me—other traffic had slowed but this one guy in a pick-up didn't—he slammed the dog back into the bed of the pick-up—I could see the dog tags.

It was a surreal and existential experience as I tried to save a chihuahua with dog tags as it headed toward a major intersection. It was on Center Street in Arlington headed north. He also made it to the fifth lane—I tried my best—I believe it was 2004.

When I lived off Collins north of Matlock in Arlington in 2005 my neighbor treated his dog very badly and I did nothing. I still feel bad about that.

So I thought about cruelty to animals—would it be cruelty to put a dog where there is vomit by where it sleeps? Where mice are constantly trying to get its food and where roaches leave their droppings where he sleeps? I believe this would constitute cruelty to any animal, especially man's best friend.

How about that in 2021 on Dec 28 while at the Mark Michael unit I was moved to a cell with vomit on the wall. The mouse droppings formed a thin layer underneath the bed. There were layers of mouse droppings on both storage bins. The light didn't work. The roaches were rampant on the ceiling and by the cracks in the wall.

I worked on Christmas Day on Dec 27, 2021. I was diagnosed with a severe ear infection. I was made medically unassigned for 7 days. The following morning I was moved from that cell in segregation 12-F-76. I stayed there for 45 days. I got three showers—1 hour of rec.

Why was I moved there? Because I needed a 'cool bed'. It was winter and I was in the dorms. The hypocritical US federal judges ignore the fact I was by the camera so you could have seen the 7 mice I ran out the opening they made in the shirt and paper I had stuffed underneath the door to keep them out. The judge also said—well, "they gave you antibiotics." Suppose there was no video of George Floyd or Pretti?

A long time ago the US Supreme CRAP knew that if the media was allowed to monitor prison conditions public outcry would demand reform and that costs money. So, to prove how gullible and stupid and really selfish the herd is, they said—you got mail—what a joke.

I will continue to try to expose not only what has happened to me but to many others. What happened to me was the result of my grievances and lawsuits—what is happening with Trump is a wake up call but the greedy racists can't see that unless they are rich the goons in the very near future will be coming for them.

***We're All Dog People (More or Less)*, Andrew Krosch**

What's that? You say you're <u>not</u> a dog person? Let me give you something to chew on. I promise to keep the puppy puns to a minimum. Animals are inexorably linked to our existence, mostly to their own detriment. Hunted, herded, factory farmed. Cats and dogs are the rare exception, prosperous, for the most part, under our world hegemony. Cats are and forever will be, well, cats. Dogs are us – people. They've evolved with us over millenia. Assuming my bachelor of science (BS!) degree I earned from the college of public library system and the Nature Channel is correct, dogs are the only animals <u>drawn</u> to fire; they've lived with people for so long that it's genetically linked to feelings of food and the safety of the pack. They evolved with us and have shaped our world in ways beyond food and security. Even those who don't consider themselves dog people have had their lives affected by dogs.

What do we get from dogs when they're directly part of our life? We get the kind of love and affection and loyalty that can truly be called unconditional. Well... there may be a fair amount of bribery involved in the form of puppy treats and belly rubs and time to run off the leash. The real costs, some pet food, veterinary care. A pretty good return on that investment (ROI). Unconditional love and loyalty. There's a less obvious but much larger expense involved in our equation. The time and love we supply in return. "Who's a good dog? You's a good dog..."

Did I mention that my BS! degree in science has been heavily influenced by sci-fi? Same difference, right? Let's look at some axioms on a universal scale. Cosmic sociology tells us that "1) Survival is the primary need of civilization. 2)

Civilization grows and expands, but the total matter in the universe remains constant." A fancy way of saying there's only so much stuff in the world, which means there's usually not enough to go around, whether that's food, shelter, or medical. Time and love, while not concrete objects, are not infinite. Everything's got limits.

As a nation of roughly 330 million people, when measured collectively, how much food, shelter, medical, time and love and other finite resources are spent on the hundreds of millions of dogs we've welcomed into our lives? To get all cold hearted and analytical, the famous farm essayist G. Orwell of *1984*, "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." If you and I and a bunch of other humans go and hoard all the food and shelter and medical stuff on our side of town and shunt our dog friends to the other side, they aren't going to at some point say enough is enough, rise up in an armed mob and come demanding their fair share at the point of pitchfork, machine gun, nuclear bomb, or cyber attack.

All animals are equal. Some are more equal than others. We decide which are more valuable all the time. Explicitly, by commission, but more often implicitly, by omission, all we don't do, things as simple as speaking up, speaking out at the inequity all around us.

All lives should be valued, respected. Sounds good. Until we recall that second axiom. There's only ever so much to go around and we ain't that good at sharing. As I write this and you read it somewhere there's a beloved dog gobbling down farm-fresh doggy deliciousness delivered by DoorDash while elsewhere a child starves to death in a mud hut or refugee tent cradled in its parents' helpless arms. How's that for crapping all over your day when we should be sharing happy thoughts about our favorite dog. (We had a black lab mix named Shadow. How original, right?)

I don't know what I'm asking. The world was broken long before we showed up on the scene and will be broken long after we're gone. We are, as a species, a mess. Maybe what I'm asking is for us to stop once in a while and do an audit of our personal conduct. We may not have anything to offer when it comes to food, shelter, medical, etc, but we should always be able to scrape a little time and love together to share.

Allow me to close by saying that none of the preceding dismal depressing crap is my fault. The television made me do it. Day after day they run a commercial of this dog or that living like a king, the next commercial, very next commercial, a kid in a hut made out of sticks and grass, crippled and starving, the voice urging us to send just a few pennies a day… Good thing God invented remote controls, right…?

Edited for length.

***Dogs,* Ryan Lapp**

Wow, what a theme! I can't imagine life without dogs. I have had dogs that I love more than people (most people). I can't remember a time in life when I didn't have a dog. I grew up on a farm and we always had pet dogs, but we also bred Queensland Heelers for sale to other farmers. I miss those days so much.

My favorite dog Sassy was almost 20 years old when she passed away. I still get emotional when I think about my baby. Hands down Sassy was the smartest dog I've ever known. She was a border collie/black lab and she would chase squirrels, birds, and cats until she hyperventilated if I let her. She was a natural at being trained. I had a connection to Sassy that was so close I could command her with a look, hand signal or single word commands.

Sassy girl was the "apple of my eye" and no dog could ever replace her. This animal was by far more loyal than almost any human being has ever been. Everyone in my circle loved her. She was friendly but protective of me. If I didn't like someone, Sassy would pick up on the vibe and she was very unfriendly towards that person even if I was trying to hide my dislike of the individual. She could also sense ill intentions that I might miss. I will end this story with wet eyes now.

R.I.P "Sassy Girl".

***Dogs,* Michael Medina**

When it comes to movies, the funniest one to me is the action hero dog, Bolt. He was a pampered dog, like any other celebrity, and would do heroic deeds to save people and stop crime. However, he wasn't aware that he didn't actually have super powers. There's a scene where a friend is locked in a cage and so he tells everyone to stand back as he prepares to open it…with his laser vision. As he is staring at the lock, motionless, expressionless, his friends ask him what's he doing. His response was "If I stare at it long enough, it opens."

A favorite memory I have is going to Home Depot with my dad. When he wasn't working in the

office, he was a handy man. He built things, remodeled things, mickey-moused things, whichever was needed. So, we would go to Home Depot around 11 in the morning often to pick up some supplies. As a kid, I had no idea what every tool did nor what we were looking for. I was just waiting for the best part of the trip. After buying what he needed we would get lunch. Outside, in the Home Depot parking lot, was a lady with a hot dog stand. We would each get a bag of chips, an ice-cold Coke, and a hot dog. I would top mine with an ungodly amount of ketchup and mustard and we would sit at one of her little tables. The smell of wood will always remind me of lunch with dad.

My mom recently bought her first house. It was her dream to buy one and make sure all her kids have a place to go in case of emergencies. She keeps the "family sticks together" motto close to heart. Unfortunately, I wasn't there during the process but I kept up with phone calls. In the end, she got the house and went back after she got the keys. Everything was fine until she saw what was left in the backyard: a dog. She thought the previous owners forgot the dog but after calling the realtor, she comes to find out the dog didn't belong to the previous owners and it was there before them! They took their stuff and left the dog. My mom had no intention of keeping him, but over time the dog grew on her. He listens to her, more than to my brother, and eats all the leftovers (which I'm not totally jealous of). So the dog named Dodger came with the house.

When I'm home, I look forward to petting the house dog as we eat our hot dogs while watching a cartoon superhero dog movie.

***Dogs,* Cesar Hernandez**

They say that dogs are man's best friend. Yet every time you open the fence, the first thing a dog wants to do is run away.

Here at this prison, there are plenty of pet cats but no pet dogs.

The only dogs here are the drug detecting dogs. I don't think the dogs are trained very well. It almost seems like the dog will randomly alert. Some people clearly have drugs yet the dogs don't alert.

I get annoyed when the dogs come inside my cell. All I keep thinking is that their paws are filthy from walking all over the prison. As soon as they leave I wash the cell floor. I try to not think about how those filthy paws stepped all over my bedsheet and mattress.

***Dogs*, Chazten Wells**

My name is Chaz and I have a story to bring forth. I made a decision that changed my life and destroyed my ability to maintain control of my life. During my incarceration past and present I have had to make many very hard choices. I write this to clear my mind and make space in my heart to bring to light my dog, Blossom; she is a sweetheart and will always be dear to me.

I made a phone call to my wife late one night following a message from my mama telling me it was urgent.

"Hey," my wife said in a very somber tone. "Blossom was found by Mom, laying in a hole she dug in the sun, luckily Mom found her." My wife continued, "She seems so sad, she is paralyzed and she is pooping herself." I tried to ask to give her a night, give her water, and stay with her. I had to figure out how to wrap my head around this and stay strong. My best friend needed me and what could I do...

She was paralysed because I had to leave; it was my fault she was in this position, but why did it have to be my baby, my best friend. I saved her when she was dumped at a gas station and gave her a life she loved, and she had friends: my other puppy and my two cats. Dexter, Axel, and Shadow are my babies, and Blossom will always be with them, even in spirit.

I called my wife the following morning– Blossom was crying in the background– to talk about Blossom. Blossom wanted to stand, she wanted to be normal, she wanted to play, and yet she could only lay there and cry. My head was tucked between my legs on the phone. How did I resemble a dog with its ears pinned back, and their tail between their legs? I did not know what to do, and what could I do with where I was and the control I was given? I had to make a choice, a very painful choice. I asked if my wife figured out what happened to Blossom. She was bit in the back by a Timber Wood Rattler, and to this day I will never see a snake the same.

I had to make the decision to put her down, to take my baby's life, to send her to doggy heaven so she could lay next to my uncle while he plays cribbage. I will forever miss my best friend. Why did I have to be in this position, to hear her, but not to see her, or feel her. I made a decision that I can never change, but why did I have to give my best friend for my mistakes? I love you Blossom, and you will always be on my arm. I lost my mind when I

lost my best friend, but how do I see the world without her to bark at me and cuddle with me when I was having a bad day? Why did Dexter have to lose Blossom? Where did the time go when she was tearing up the house like a Tasmanian Devil? She would run across the house over my guests' laps, after tennis balls, scaring the cats, chasing Shadow, running into doors and living the best life I could afford to give her.

I was in the military when I found her, but now I am in incarceration when I lost her. I wish it was me instead of her. Those snakes will find out how much pain they put my best friend in. I hope I get to see her when I leave this plane. Goodbye for now, Blossom, but know you will always be missed with your rambunctious antics. I was never really a dog person until Dexter and Blossom, yet I got so attached to them that I can never let go of the memories that tear me away from them. Dexter is my other dog, Axel is an orange cat, and Shadow is my black cat. Blossom was black and a big ole fluff ball. Please look after her Chad; she was a goof ball but a good one.

***The Other Puppy,* Chrissandra Brewster**

I found out the hard way, never make a promise to your children and expect them to forget about it. Alize, my two-year old daughter, overheard me talking to her daddy one night about the Boxer he had as a child.

This prompted a time-honored question: "Can I have a dog?"

"Well, babygirl, mommy and daddy don't have their own place," I responded. "I promise that when we do then you can have a dog."

Fast forward four years. We moved into a townhouse. We had a little brother, KC, for Alize and her older brother Jaelen, who lived with us every other week. It was the beginning of the holidays, so I started thinking about possible presents. Unbeknownst to me Alize, now age six, has also been thinking of present possibilities..

I'm in the living room doing some online shopping on my tablet when she crawled up on the couch next to me. "What are you doing, Mommy?" I responded, "Just looking at stuff," as I clicked out of the windows. Alize moved the laptop and settled into my lap to look me straight in the eye. "Can I have a dog?" Before I could answer she continued, "You said when we had our own place that I could have a dog. You promised!" So I decided to get a dog for my kids and my baby daddy, Phillip as a surprise. Specifically, I'd get the kind of dog he had growing up, a Boxer.

After weeks of searching and following dead ends, I found a litter for sale. The owner said she had two males and two females. "Perfect!" I said to her on the phone. "I want a female." The same kind of female Phillip had, with a fawn coat and a white star shaped patch on her face.

We agreed to meet the next day, Saturday, but she lived in Miami about three hours away. Also she couldn't meet us until after work. We agreed she'd call. How could I trick my family into a trip? As luck would have it, there was a super home decor store in Ft. Lauderdale. I simply had to visit and complete shopping and furnishing our home.

Imagine this, myself, Phillip, and two of my children in the car for a long trip. Then I led them around the decor store throwing random items into the shopping cart. Finally, the call came and I slipped into an adjacent aisle to take it.

"Phillip!" I called. "We have to drive south right now!" Confused, he left the cart and we got into the car. As we hit Miami we kept driving deeper and deeper south following the directions. Soon I realized we were in Little Havana. It was full dark when we finally found the house. After ringing the bell a snarling bark was heard behind the door. A massive Boxer stood next to a Hispanic man. He told us both females were sold earlier in the day.

To say I was upset is an understatement. I wanted to surprise Alize by keeping my promise and Phillip by giving him something from his childhood. We agreed to look at the remaining puppies and were led to a porch. One puppy ran up happily to Phillip. He bent down to pet him but I wasn't seeing a connection. Hidden in the shadows at the back of the porch was another puppy.

"You don't want this one." The man said. He placed the other puppy in front of Phillip. "It's the runt." Phillip got down on the floor slowly so the puppy didn't startle. He held out his hand and waited. The puppy approached slowly so as to not startle Phillip and laid his head in Phillip's palm. It was the

connection I hoped for. "We'll take this one." He said.

We found the newest member of our family. That night I drove home because Phillip and the puppy couldn't be separated. It fell asleep in his lap. The kids went back and forth about what to name him. Alize won and named him Kingston.

***Dogs with Smiles,* Jennifer Prendergast**

A dog chased me and my little sister as we walked home from school in 5th grade. He was black and ferocious. We ran into a stranger's garage for protection and waited for our hearts to stop racing before continuing home. The fear residing within me prevented me from considering a dog as a pet for many years.

Until one day in 7th grade, I met Lincoln, a yellow Lab puppy. Lincoln was my best friend's dog. Whenever I spent the night, Lincoln slept curled up at my feet. He was the sweetest dog. Lincoln was loyal, playful and this dog could smile!

Lincoln changed my perspective on dogs. A love story grew in my heart and I still smile and get chills thinking of Lincoln's smile.

Many years later, when I was 19, my boyfriend gifted me Duchess, a precious tan pit bull puppy with the bluest eyes and white paws seemingly dipped in paint. She was all mine. We shared a connection beyond what words could describe.

As a puppy, she trotted by my side without a leash. When I smiled, she smiled. When I got sick, she lay beside me. The day I had to give up Duchess, my queen, it broke my heart.

She's had puppies since, a batch of 8 and has moved on with her new family. I will always love and miss her.

***My Dogs,* Brenda Telusme**

I have four dogs. They mean the world to me. Their names are Kash, Dubai, Snow and Prince.

Kash is six years old and has been in my life since he was a puppy. He loves my kids and is both overprotective and insecure. He swears that he is human. Can't nobody do no harm to my children. He is ready for war. Kash hates the police and when somebody is not supposed to be around he lets me or Daddy, my husband, know.

This dog loves belly rubs, playing, and getting spoiled. He gets jealous when other dogs come to the house. He has to be introduced and get to know them. He can get vicious and wants to fight unless you are a girl dog.

Snow is a girl I had since she was a puppy. She is a low rider bully dog with tan and white. This girl is sweet and loves to be chased around the house. Snow also likes to snuggle and sleeps with her tongue hanging out.

Prince is a one-year-old bully with Oreo color. He will make you talk and scream by chewing up all your clothes, shoes, the couch and your remote keys. He comes whenever you call and is ready to play too much. He's a good boy and always goes outside to the bathroom.

Dubai is my brindle Frenchie. He's the sweetest and most expensive.

These dogs are my best friends, my protection and like my kids. When my children go to school, Mash is the first one to the car. At the school drop off he wants to get out of the car and go to class. Mash is the bully and has been shot at when the police came to my house for my husband. Daddy is the only one who teaches Mash to be in time out. Oh yeah, time out!

***Unconditional Love,* Deborah True**

I've had many dogs over my life. Through the turmoil of my childhood, my dogs were my love and comfort. It continues into my adult life.

Dogs give unconditional love always. They know when you are sad and react with kisses, snuggles and tail wagging. If not for my many, many dogs, I don't know where the love I felt would have come from.

I prefer dogs and animals to people. Dogs are loyal and not judgmental. They can be a class clown or a guardian to their human family. All a dog asks for in return is food, a great game of ball, fetch or Frisbee. They enjoy a good romp in the snow, a nice long walk or a great day playing with other dogs in the dog park.

At the end of the day, dogs will lie at your feet or snuggle with you in bed while watching TV. Snoring to their heart's content, dogs let you know all is right in their world.

Everyone should experience the joy and love of dogs.

***Buck and Snook,* Morgan Leppert**

Growing up on a farm, I've had almost every animal. Dogs and horses are my favorite. I had so many dogs it's hard to pick a favorite. Buck, an American Bulldog, was the one I had before prison. He was my saving grace and took my attention off of anything negative. Buck could smell bad in the air. He'd bark and growl every time my codefendant came around.

Snook was an Alaskan Malamute. He wasn't very nice to new people. A lot of friends got chased away. I can remember my animals just not the relationships. It's hard to remember things from outside. So I don't know how to write about them. I honestly don't even know what to write. I'm not really a writer.

***Dog Poetry,* Raquel Hernandez**

Puppy
    Four legs
Pet
    is the animal for me.
Do I have to buy pee pads?
    Is the dog vaccinated?
Does it chew on shoes?
    Why are you getting rid of your pet?
How many times a day do I need to feed this dog?

***Dogs,* Sandra Cook**

When I was 16 years old, I would go out to Stark's, Florida and hang out with Josh, my high school sweetheart and his family. We rode go-carts and horses, played in lakes, and did what most kids do when having fun. Little did I know that the next door neighbors were breeders of my favorite kind of dog in the whole world, dalmatians.

When I got wind of this news, I went to asking questions. "Are you letting any of them go? How much are they?" Surely if I asked my dad he'd give me the money.

I was in luck! They were getting rid of a few and keeping the rest. I would come back in a few weeks when the puppies were six weeks old. I did return with bells on my shoes. I picked out the girl I wanted. She had a heart-shaped spot on her left ear. It was love at first sight.

When I picked her up, she peed all down my front. I didn't get mad, I was in love. Driving home with my new baby, I thought up the name Dotty Kelly O'Steen. My kid was with us well into my twenties.

When I got into trouble, my mom took her. Dotty was eleven years old. I asked about her every day. "She's doing good," they said. But that wasn't true.

Dotty grieved herself to death. I was all she knew. Dogs love us. They truly are man's best friend because Dotty was mine.

***Rez Dawgs,* George Hesse**

We usually had over 10 dogs and 5 cats at any given time growing up. Mostly mutts, all loved very much. My siblings and I were always fond of picking up any and every stray. I'm talking about some pretty ugly dogs. Beat down with mange sometimes. All loved very much. We had a beagle show up one day. Next thing you know he's howling with the pack. He always attempted to mate but no go. We had part Rots, Labs and pitts. My brother had a kennel in the backyard and he bred mixes. He got a pure-bred pit bull and made the mix bloodline look pretty cool. Fat-headed mutts. All loved, very much. Peace, from your unbalanced pen pal.

***Convict Chronicles: Ode to the Dad Whistle,* Leo Cardez**

Like a well-trained German Shepherd guard dog, my ears would perk up and neck strain toward the high-pitched sound. My father's unique whistle could be heard for miles. It had a certain melodic rhythm (peaks and valleys) —I will never forget it. He used it to beckon my sister and me at the park, neighborhood, weekend soccer games, anywhere really. This is back when kids still played outside and front doors stayed unlocked.

We could never claim we couldn't hear it—planes passing overheard could hear it. He tried to teach it to me when I got older, but not all of us have the whistle gene. Instead I would whistle the Andy Griffith intro or the famous shoot-out scene from the Eastwood western. But at some point I stopped. With the advent of social media and endless apps, my attention went elsewhere. We don't really need the dad whistle anymore, do we? Kids as young as 5 are getting phones; electronic whistles like texts and IMs have replaced the parent's yell. For that matter, any whistling seems rare and out-of-touch. No more cat-calls (although, I suppose, that's a woke thing.) Does anyone whistle while they work anymore? Or while strolling in the park? No one seems to care to learn how to whistle anymore; my daughter certainly didn't. "I don't need to know how to whistle or write in cursive," she explained. "That's so yesterday." Maybe she's right. Maybe whistling is obsolete, just another casualty of the technological revolution. Think about it, when's the last time you whistled?

But, every now and then, I hear a loud piercing whistle and it takes me right back to ice cream trucks and skinned knees. My ears perk up, and I think about my dad. I'm coming home, dad. I'm coming.

***Dogs*, Brandon Johnson**

My thoughts on prisoners are that we are just like dogs: when we get a visit, or someone picks up on the other end of the phone when we call, we get excited, like a dog wagging its tail when you come home. But once the visit ends, or the phone call is over, it's back to the kennel we go. Not knowing when our next visit will be, or the next time someone will pick up the phone again. Just like a dog not knowing how long you been gone, but gets excited every time you come back home. Then you got other dogs that don't have a home, or people visiting them, that spend most of their life, if not their whole lives, in a kennel.

***Dogs,* Quentric Williams**

What's up, Prisoner Express family? The only two memories I have on this topic is once when my friend was selling puppies and they were turning 11 weeks old and he says, "Q, I have to get rid of them for free."

"No pressure," I reply.

We load them into the car and I let them puppies loose in an apartment complex in front of all the children. Once they started to yell about the puppies, I drove off.

Another time was when my friends kept saying that I needed a friend. "Pet." I was like, "whatever!" So they started up the petition. Every month I would walk in the house to a new pet. The one that stood out the most was a Pit. I forget the gender, but I would feed and take him/her outside to run around and smell. It once ran around the yard sounding like a horse, then turned toward me coming full speed. I forgot what I did but the animal stopped in its tracks only inches away. The whole visit my new friend never barked at all. So I tell my friend that maybe I need a new one, because I'm running the door myself. So I keep going; now something else happened, and I can't leave the house anymore. So now the barber has to come to me at night and I'm in the kitchen getting my hair cut and the barber tells my roommate to grab the dog. The animal would not let dude put the clippers on my head; but my pet is not barking, only inching forward. The last night that I had him/her she must have known it was over with. She barked a couple times to let me know someone was in the driveway, then walked into the kitchen before I opened the door.

***Training Dogs*, Howard Brown**

In the spring of 2003 a fellow prisoner gave me a manilla envelope full of Prison Pen Pals ads. I selected several ads of interest to me. The rest got passed on.

One ad I kept is a woman in prison in Wilsonville, Oregon. In three of her photos she is posed with a happy looking white dog. Her words educated me that some prisoners have programs for training dogs. She wrote: "...I love that I have been given the opportunity to work in the canine program within the facility. It brings me much

happiness when watching the dogs leave here to possibly have a companion and assistant to a disabled person. I have a big heart for animals…"

In Massachusetts there are prisoners training dogs also. I have not seen it, but a fellow prisoner told me how he enjoyed playing with the puppies.

I've seen the TV show "Lucky Dog". It's amazing to watch the process of training dogs. Brandon gets a rescue dog to train basic commands. Having seen that, it seems that in the process of training dogs, the prisoner is training himself/herself to be a good candidate for reentry into society. Trained dogs leave to serve. It follows trained prisoners may leave better persons also.

***Pet Project,* Belinda Ladd**

Convicts can be notoriously self-focused. Maybe that is why so many of us find ourselves locked up, and for some of us, repeatedly. My first time was in Oregon and I was a short-timer, so they sent me to Cornerstone, a drug and alcohol program run by the DOC. We were housed in what had been an empty dorm at the nearby State Hospital. Ever see a movie called One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest? I was in the same dorm where they filmed Jack Nicholson, Will Sampson, and Louise Fletcher's McMurphy, Chief, and Nurse Ratched characters. The hospital campus had many buildings, and occupants ranging from mild to wild. The Cornerstone staff wanted us to learn how to put our own interests aside and develop compassion for others, so they came up with the Pet Project. Every couple of weeks, a dozen of us would load into a passenger van and go to the local dog pound where they let us borrow puppies and kittens for several hours. We would then visit a unit and offer to let the residents hold or pet them. It was therapeutic for them, and for us.

You wouldn't believe the things I saw, like some scene from The Walking Dead. People wandered around aimlessly, some exposed, some yelling, older women clutching baby dolls as if they were real children. I'd seen bizarre Hollywood depictions of mental wards but let me tell you, some of these tortured souls were living a waking nightmare. Cornerstone's plan was working – how could you not feel compassion? As we were leaving one day, a teen called to me from a third-floor window and gave me her name, asking me to write to her. We started corresponding and she seemed totally normal. I thought perhaps someday when we were both free, we might meet in person. But after a couple of months, the Staff called me into the office where some men in suits were waiting. They told me that they were her psychiatrists and read her mail, and although there was nothing inappropriate in our letters and they couldn't force me, they politely asked me to stop writing to her. They couldn't give me any details about the reason she was a ward at the State Hospital, but that her issues may take many years to resolve, if ever, and they just didn't need me in the mix. I told them I understood and would comply. I don't know what ever happened to her, but I never forgot how unfortunate it must have been to be in her situation.

Here at the Wyoming Correctional Institution we have a different kind of Pet Project. We liberate dogs from the animal shelter and select inmates keep them in their cells, work with them daily, and train them to be service companions for deaf and hearing impaired people. They can alert them to doorbells, oven timers, smoke detectors, phone calls, and so forth. Our second dog program rescues dogs that were slated to be euthanized and obedience trains them, and then arranges for them to be adopted. It's a win-win for the dogs and their new families.

I've been a dog lover my entire life and usually have a large breed that is my buddy. I'm not one of the dog handlers here at WMCI, but I really love the fact that the dogs are here. I can see them in the library, waiting with the guys in the pill line, lounging on the cement floor in the classrooms, and of course on the big yard where I can pet them. You just don't know how good it is for a lonely prisoner to be able to hug a doggy-dog!

***Coping with Incarceration Borne PTSD the Canine Way,* Christopher Monihan**



I have worked numerous prison jobs. None have helped me more than handling and training dogs as a dog handler.

Over the 20 years I have worked in the dog programs my official titles have included: Dog Handler, Animal Trainer, and even Cat Handler after a one-year stint nurturing kittens back to health in our now-defunct cat program.

Unofficially I have been called the Bird Man, Snake Guy, and Mouse Dude—monikers coined by the men around me after the creatures I've caught flapping, slithering, and skittering about my cell.

The pound program is where I got my start two decades ago. I was 10 years in on a 50-year sentence and struggling to cope. The dogs rescued me. In many ways pound program dogs and incarcerated people share a common adversity. Both are viewed as societal throwaways without clear futures.

Once here I nurtured the dogs back to wholeness through constant interaction. I then trained them in basic commands—such as sit, stay, down, and come, to name just a few—and prepared them for eventual adoption into new forever homes.

Seven years have passed since I donned my latest hat and today I am a staff Dog Handler. As the name implies the dogs I care for and train are staff owned.

To become a dog handler in this program required federal certification, which I earned through a two-year 4,000-hour apprenticeship in the pound rescue program. The staff-owned dogs tend to be calm and well mannered. It is a stark contrast to pound dogs which are a random walk. However, life behind bars hasn't always been good.

I didn't always have the benefit of the dogs. For many years I struggled with trauma inflicted by the prison environment like so many incarcerated people do. I found no help from the prison system.

In my 2023 Prison Journalism Project op-ed I wrote about incarceration borne PTSD (IBPTSD). The prison environment is uniquely structured to foster trauma because the primary focus of prisons is on confinement. Little consideration is made for how the prison experience affects the psyche of incarcerated people.

The problem is compounded when incarcerated people experience verbal or physical violence, the loss of a loved one, even the stress of parenting from prison. These potentially traumatic events, also known as PTEs, are supported by a 2019 literature review that determined PTEs and PTSD share compelling correlation.

On the prison yard, the warmth of the morning sun soaks into my pores. A light breeze grazes my face.

"Arabella! Arabella!" I shout to the two-year-old American Bully. "Get the ball!" I dance an exaggerated two step on the grassy field. Arabella returns the ball at my feet. She is owned by one of the staff.

"Ready?" I fling the pink nubby ball high and far.

Arabella recedes into the distance, her brown and white legs pumping. A crowd of men has gathered afar along the concrete walkway.
The guys aren't allowed on the grass, only us handlers. Although I can't hear their voices I understand everything. Watching the dogs at play is how they are coping with prison. It is their therapy.

Incarceration borne PTSD (IBPTSD) isn't recognized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders, the authoritative source on mental disorders used by psychologists and health care providers. There is nothing in the literature and there are no IBPTSD studies.

The closest thing to recognition is the term Post Incarceration Syndrome. It recognizes that millions of restored citizens struggle once back in society but no one truly knows why—except, of course, those who have endured incarceration. Maybe someone should ask us?

The key, I feel, is recognition that IBPTSD is real and borne from the prison experience. Mental health advocates are starting to acknowledge that the trauma of incarceration itself may make some people more likely to develop PTSD. Trauma left unchecked can become severe.

"Good girl Arabella," I said. I petted her head and flung the ball one last time.

I inhaled and exhaled. My eyes met the sun and for a moment I felt peace. My unofficial therapy moment was almost over.

Tomorrow, if I am lucky, I will get to do it all again.

***The Trouble,* Cheryl Kuhl**

My family laughs at me because my world is about dogs. I've always had dogs. I grew up with two of them. There is usually a dog in the house.

My mom was allergic to everything so I had poodles. When I was in middle school, I came home one day to find what looked like a bear in our house. It was a New Foundland puppy, a small bear. My mom was too sick so we couldn't keep him.

When I moved to my own place, I took two poodles, soon it was three. My daughter has one now that she left home. My dogs got left behind for several days when I got arrested. I will never see them again. They were given away.

I know they are well loved. I hope my dogs know just how much I loved them. My next life adventure already has a few dogs.

***Mona Lisa Smile,* Robert Urban**

Her lips bore the taste of alcohol,
the hue of a fire red wine.
Pinot Noir.
California.
A vintage year.
Her eyes, they glance with a concentrated purpose.
Her smile, an undefined mystery.
Something uncertain.
What is the occurrence to be found within such a beautiful and complex mind?
The possibilities are numerous like that of the grains of sand that cover a secluded beach,
The stars resting above me on a cloudless night—
Luminated only by that of the moon.
Then again, perhaps I will never know.
The great mystery found to be within her.
Does she even know?
I wonder.
The memory is an enchanting one.
The memory is likewise the adoption of profound confusion.
Who is she?
The girl with the Mona Lisa smile.

***The Green Line*, Kelly Messenger**

This picture right here reminds me of myself when my mom put me out of the house before I got this case. For months I was wandering around Detroit gettin' money the only way I knew how. I started doping in the car with people and taking off with their cars when they went into the gas station to get me things I would ask for. Most of them would just leave the car running because it was cold out. I took a gun from a dope boy, long story, but one day I got sick and, yeah, I was silently trippin' a little and decided to go to Illinois because I had a cold or the flu. I got a bottle of Robitussin cough syrup and booked a bus to Illinois/ Chicago. Just wandering off you know because I had no place to go. I met someone at the liquor store who let me spend the night. We was cool. When I woke up I was hungry and he said "Get something to eat." The fridge and cupboards were full and so I made a pizza pocket/hot pocket and left. I paid $2 and got on the Green Line train and, here I am, I fell asleep. I must've slept for like 10 hours. I woke up and got off somewhere random. The police stopped me after wandering around for a while. I was sure I was going to jail with that gun in my coat pocket. I had a hole in the coat pocket so it would fit. They asked me what I'm doing in a black neighborhood. I told them I was from Detroit and I was checking out the clothing lines. They didn't ask my name and didn't pat me down. I went straight back to Detroit that same day.

***Work Travel,* D'Andre Morris**

I got a new job as a housekeeper. I had to get work clothes. My father gave me a loan so I could. I was confused when my father said he was going to give me money to be comfortable at my new job. But I had to pay him back.

"A loan?" I said.

"Listen, it's time you be responsible. I present a lesson. For this deal only. I'm giving you $10,000. You must pay it back. I want you to be your best, so spend this for job purposes only."

"Why do I got to pay you back? I can't pay $10,000."

"You can," my father encouraged.

"So, you want $500 a month, every two weeks. What?"

"Pay me how you see fit. What you think is best. I will not mention it, nor cause you pressure about this loan. But I expect it paid back. I must teach you social responsibility. For a father without a lesson is no father. And I am your father, love."

I'm headed to get my friend, then to the bus stop. I have not gone to the car dealership yet. Buying a used car requires extreme pickiness and I am already picky.

We were headed to the mall. I mostly needed beige pants and black shirts for work and I am getting several outfits.

My friend was power walking toward me. Such impatience. "I had to come and get you. You ready! The faster we go, the quicker we get to shop," my friend paused and smiled, then continued. "I need some new shoes."

"You getting some Nikes?"

"Naw, Jays."

"You got some Jay money?"

"Quit playing, You got me?"

"I don't, I'm on a budget." I replied.

"We got to get some sunglasses."

"Yeah!" I agreed.

"Make it the first thing we get. We walk around like that, they gone call us 'The shade ladies.'"

"Shade ladies! I like that. But the first thing I need is a massage."

"Did you call and schedule?" my friend asked.

"Oh damn. We just gone walk in."

"You lying. You know that ain't gone work."

"We ain't going for no back massage, though." I added.

"What else is there?"

"We getting our feet massaged. I know you know about the feet. Feel so good," I stated.

"Oh yeah! We should do that last," my friend suggested.

We practically bought the mall. We shopped until closing hour. We even developed body guards. Three men accompanied us to assure our safety. Of course, we knew the men. We knew them from a spot we go when we're bored with nothing to do. It has a pool table, bar, and diner. A day time club.

I treated everyone. I was buying them one gift of their desire. But, my girlfriend had a higher budget.

At last, we were at a mall's restaurant eating, getting ready to leave before they close. We were so animated, having a good time. We barely touched our food, which was around $80.

The men promised they would make sure we got to the bus stop on time to make it on the bus. We had a lot of bags plus we had to leave our food behind and make our grand escape out the mall.

The men felt bad about wasting good money and good food. To get our money's worth we invented a game called 'Messy Money'.

We made the biggest mess before we got up. Knowing the mall workers were going to be upset. That they would have to stay longer to clean and the cooks will be disappointed. Because the good food they cooked was wasted.

Compliments to the cook. The food was excellent.

"Now we got to get out of here. Before they come and apprehend us for this mess," Robert stated. "Let's get the bags and run to the East side entrance before they come and get us."

"Here they come," someone said.

We all grabbed bags and ran. Yelling and laughing.

I heard someone yelling "Stop running!" as we made it to the door.

We were breathing hard. We took deep breaths in the middle of sentences.

"We made it. I got to check and see that I got everything," I said and it was good.

"I lost my $150 watch you bought me," Tone cried.

I was exhausted. I slept on the bus, headed home. My friend woke me at our stop. As the men walked us home, Tone found his lost watch on his wrist (LOL).

***Untitled*, Nicholas Wilson**

It's been one of those days: Another job interview, another rejection. It goes the same way every time.

"I see here there's a 25-year gap in your employment history on your resume. Care to explain?" the interviewer says, with a knowing smirk.

You go on to explain, but as it often does, your words fall on deaf ears. So you leave feeling dejected, humiliated and fed up.

'What's the point?' you think. Overwhelmed and tired, you allow the rumble on the train to lull you to sleep, hoping for a brief respite from the current failures of the day.

As the train arrives at your stop, you awake to find an envelope lying on the seat next to you. You open it, inside is a letter. The letter briefly reads:

> *Hey. You don't know me, but I recognize you from the news coverage of your parole hearing and subsequent release. The world may not be ready to forgive, but I have. Hang in there. I've enclosed my card and a check to help you get what you need to get your life back on track. Call me and I'll get you set up with a job too...*

You look around hoping to spot the Good Samaritan, but in the sea of people it could be anyone. The check is a cashier's check made out to you for $10,000 and the name on the card is that of the son of your victim.

You stand there, tears streaming down your face, dumbfounded, unsure of what's next.

***The Subway: The Reunion & the Photograph (an excerpt)*, Marcus Alfredo Flores**

I had the feeling we were being followed. Sarah was oblivious. If she did know she hid it very well. In the Unseen we called these "The Watchers." There was a distinction between the feeling of my teacher monitoring my whereabouts and The Watchers. Though the teacher could very well have invoked The Watchers to watch me, my perception conveyed to me they were sent for a different purpose. Something felt "off".

Sarah and I were going to the subway to reunite; to coalesce. I'm kidding – to head to her mom's house. I took this picture of her as she slept. If you look close enough you can see her ring. It's Tiffany.

A stale draft had settled over my aura like a dead weight. I was keenly aware of a prickling behind my neck; a chill in the air that city through bone and sinew.

***The Quiet: Ten*, Jonathan Holeman**

I've been able to piece it all together. With my experiences, with Adam's visions. There's still some unanswered questions, but by writing notes with Jessica, it's all coming together.

I awoke in the city. All electronic devices had stopped working. Everything was quiet. The world moved on. Some people survived but had instantaneously become zombie-like. They wouldn't attack anyone. They just stood outside buildings at random. If there was a pattern, I'd missed it. Inside the buildings where "standers" gathered, there was a person that acted as a sort of digital signal that attracted the standers. The "receivers", the ones inside, they became a sort of banshee. Interrupt their signal and they let out a horrifying scream that deafened anyone nearby. It also severed their "connection" with the standers, and they all immediately died.

Unfortunately, my experience with a "receiver". It was a woman at a beach house weeks after it all began, about six weeks. Her body was failing, so when I approached her, after she lost the signal, she must've died. Too long standing there. It still bothers me though. I served in World War 3, a decorated soldier. When she screamed, I ran. I only assume she died

afterwards. I suppose we all can be brave or cowardly in the right conditions.

Adam's experience was different. He gained the power to show events in his life to others. Jessica calls it fire-hands. Honestly, it could have a better name. He showed me everything now. All he showed me lately was the girl, the last time he saw her, on a subway in the city. She sat sleeping. Leaning against a window, on a subway she was controlling with her powers.

Adam had shown me how they met. He, as a toddler, had wandered into a building his zombified mother was staring at. Adam kicked the banshee receiver. I assume, before the process was complete. Her scream deafened Adam, but this teenager, or woman in her early twenties, immediately became Adam's protector after the scream was released. The girl took Adam out of the building and held him close as the standers outside fell to the ground, dead.

She took Adam from the crowded city, out into the country. She could touch electronics and machines, turning them on and off. They found other survivors along the way. Eventually they made it to my city. Adam showed me visions of them walking down my street, right by the hat I dropped when I ran from the standers that first day.

So much was unclear as Adam showed me one of the survivors hitting the girl. They fled from a few survivors. My best guess was some of them, with no authorities to answer to, thought they could do as they wanted. They must've wanted the girl to use her power for something she did not want to. This caused a group of survivors to flee the others. They fled to a subway, which the girl turned on with her power. There was a man and another woman with them. Now they were being hunted.

The girl fell asleep, as she seemed to after using her power. The subway moved but Adam's visions became odd after this. As if he was slung over someone's shoulder. The older woman? He was bouncing around, everything appeared upside down. Over and over he shows us the girl, asleep on this subway, and him moving away from her.

Then visions of an abusive older woman taking him back to the other survivors. Adam was taken out here, before we came. One survivor had lost it at some point. They were all here in our valley. Visions of the crazy man shooting others, leaving them in a car across the lake. Now I know the truth, there was a madman out there, with at least two others. He had killed some of the survivors with a weapon Adam's banshee had turned on.

First things first. I need to find this madman and stop him. Adam escaped from him in a town over the western hills. He will come for Adam, Jess agrees. She says it's okay to stop him.

Adam keeps showing me the last time he saw her. There's a man who Adam seemed to like, sitting on the subway with her. Adam wants me to find her. I know this from the way he acts, the way he repeats it. He can't speak or write, it's the only way he knows to communicate. I'll find her, somehow, but first things first, dealing with the madman.

As I prepare to leave, Adam takes my hand again, showing me this pretty young girl peacefully sleeping on the subway. He thinks that's where I'm going, but, first things first.

***The Moment of Truth*, Aaron Poe**

I never knew my biological parents. Hell, I didn't even know I was adopted until I was 16. That little tidbit of information I found out by accident.

It was the first week of spring break of my senior year, and my parents made me stay home and help with spring cleaning. So instead of going to Cancun, I found out I was adopted. I was shocked, but not as shocked as my parents were when I opened up a manilla envelope I found. I was in my father's study and decided to clean out his desk, oops.

Months passed by fueled with a mixture of anger and sadness. Why was I never told? How could I love these people who have lied to me my entire life? It took almost a full year for me to be able to see the situation from their view. They raised and loved me as their own. They came to all my sporting and cheerleading events. They turned me into the woman I am today. And you know what... I like me.

I had a great childhood. I believe everything would be different if I would have known. How could I ever question my love for them? How could I not love them? Being adopted doesn't change anything other than the fact I didn't come out of my adopted mother.

So here I am, sitting in a subway car, two years after finding that envelope. I took roughly a year to track down my biological mother. It was tough, but I did it... you got to love social media! The only address she posted on her page was where she worked, and that's where I am heading.

As I sit here on this long subway ride, I have to admit I am getting cold feet. This may not be such a good idea. What do I say? Should I approach her at work, or follow her home? Would they be happy to see me? What if I ruin their perfect life by showing up? Maybe this was a horrible idea. You know what, I'll leave it up to fate, just as they did when they put me up for adoption. I should have a coin here somewhere in my purse. Ahh, here's one. Alright, heads I go and see them, tails I go back home. Alright here goes noth- everything! I open my tightly closed eyes to reveal the moment of truth and it reveals...

***Sleeping Beauty on a Bus,* Andrew Krosch**

Who's her wicked witch
A demon from years past
Or only hours ago today

Will she break
Our sleeping beauty
Or only bend

What poisoned apple laid her low
Wore her down
Where's the one who gave her /
the ring she still wears

Where's he gone

Was it the witch
Who took him away from her

Where's her prince charming
Our fair maiden alone
At midnight on a city bus

Who's going to save her now

***Are We There Yet?,* Remus Lethe**

"WILSON!!! PACK YOUR STUFF!" the officer screams on rock. It's about five-thirty in the morning when this jolts me awake. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I grogily ask my roommate, "Did she say Wilson?"

Before Loca can respond the CO bangs her keys on the door. "Vanessa Wilson?"

"Yeah, that's me." I say while hopping off the top bunk.

"Well pack up anything you wanna take with you, Christmas came early." That last part confuses me because I'd assumed she was telling me I was getting transferred to a new yard.

"What?" I ask.

"You're getting released, mija." Loca clarifies.

This really doesn't make sense because my maxout isn't for another five years and the parole board denied me just last month. I'm staring at my roommate while the CO says something about being up front before 7-o'clock count. I sit there dumbstruck for about fifteen minutes before Loca puts her coffee down, "Mija, are you alright? Don't you want to go home?"

"Loca, I'm not going home. This is probably some twisted joke the COs are playing."

She scoffs at me, "Madre de Dios! And they call me crazy. SO WHAT?! Mija, there are only two things that can happen here. One, you're right and this is some joke. You there, the guards get a laugh, and then you're back here no really worse off than before except for your pride. Oooorrrr..." She pauses and sips her coffee causing me to grin at her impression of soap opera drama. Satisfied, she exhales and sets the coffee down again. "Or you're wrong and you get to go home." She puts emphasis on this last word.

I stare at her a while longer mulling it over. She's right, of course. For the past ten years I've been waiting for this day, dreaming of it! Always asking myself "Are we there yet? Huh, is it time to go yet? When will we be there? ARE WE THERE YET!!!" Finally I'm there, and I don't believe it. I decide to go and ask Loca if she wants to share one more meal before I go.

"Of course! Oh, and leave the coffee, mija. Good Columbian is far from cheap around here."

Finally I'm up front with nothing but my Bible, my Blue Book, and some old letters and legal papers.

"Uhm, Vanessa Wilson? The CO told me I'm getting released?" I say nervously.

The guard looks at her clipboard, "Wilson... Wilson.... Wilson... ah! Yep Wilson, Vanessa, Scheduled for release. Oh, you're the one the parole board changed their mind on! Well aren't you lucky?!"

I'm completely shocked by this and the whole process of paper signing and getting dressed out and going to the bus terminal is just one big, numb blur. The next thing I know I'm on the bus, leaning against the window, and falling asleep. It's still early after all. I can't help but think as I doze off, "I'm actually there."

Song Recommendation: "Cringe" by Matt Maeson

***Lady Asleep on a Subway*, Bert Zamora**

I leave work like I do every day. I cross the street and go down the subway steps. Like I do everyday. I board a train and sit near a beautiful brunette woman like I do every day. She is never here in the morning on my way to work, just on my way home. She is in a long black coat, her purse strap over her shoulder and clutched with her arms against her chest. She has a beautiful diamond ring on her finger. Thus why I never bother her. I am very tired today and I accidently fall asleep. I awake hours later way past my stop and she is still there. We reach the end of the line. She gets up and I follow her to another train headed back into the city. As soon as we sit down she is back asleep. She does not even notice me. I feel like a creep but I cannot help it. She speaks after a bit. It's kinda creepy you're following and watching me. I am sorry I say I can move to another car if you want. She smiles, not necessary, you make me feel safe. Safe how. Well you have been watching me for a while and never bothered me. Plus with you around no one ever bothers me. So you lost, I ask. No, I live on these trains. Live on them?! Then I smile. Yeah, I guess I do too. No I mean it's my apartment at night she says. Why? I ask. I lost my husband a year ago. Brain aneurysm, died in his sleep. I couldn't live there anymore so I live here now. I work every day. I love my job so I just ride the train at night to sleep. Why not rent a room or something, I ask. She looks at me. Too lonely. I tried. Besides, I save money this way. We talk for a while then reach my stop. I stand. Do you need anything. She smiles and shakes her head no. See you tomorrow, she says. I nod and walk away. Not long and I am home and sitting on my bed. My wife rolls over. You are late. Yeah I fell asleep on the train and missed my stop. She laughs and rolls back over. I dress for bed and crawl into bed and hold my wife tight in my arms. I lay awake and think about the lady on the train. Then I think about my wife. I cannot imagine my life without her.

***Comfort*, Bruce Enos**

She is train #1567, route #117. It is the 8:15 p.m. express train departing from New York Grand Central Station with only two stops on its way to Hoboken, New Jersey. This is her favorite trip of the day, as she is able to stretch her long legs and leave the busy station behind. With frantic energy, she leaves it all behind. Having less stops to slow her down, she picks up speed. Constant starts and stops wear on her brakes, wheels, and timetables. Tonight she is a sleek bullet in her aerodynamic manufacturing. She slices through the air like a knife cuts through butter. With ease, her design is flawless, with her curves and subtle bumps as she glides effortlessly over her tracks. Tonight is pure magic. She takes comfort in knowing that her passengers, weary from a long day of work or leisure, feel safe and secure inside. So much trust, that the subtle vibration of forward motion has put one to sleep. Swaying on steel hardened springs, gently rock her travellers to rest. She prides herself at her passengers' safety, security, and ease of passage. Her whole purpose is to be of service and tonight it is clear that she is doing her job to the best of her ability. Into the dimly lit tunnel she travels forward with expectation and excitement on another satisfied journey.

***The Rails of Justice,* Cecil Sa'wuan' Huston**

My best work is done with my eyes closed. I still see you. Yes, I sleep but I don't get to rest if you think about it. You may wonder the reasons that I commute on this train; because life is like the rails of the subway or EL's; they cross paths heading to different stations of life. Some high, some low. Some fast, some slow, No matter what, all rails, unlike my former scales, follow the law of physics to the letter

Look at me, at my mere reflection as I sleep. My image reflected is flawed. The mirrored me has an image on my forehead that doesn't exist on my equal flesh. Do you see it? BAM!

That's the reason why I am the balance that equalizes the voiceless and the screamers, the victim and the perpetrator, the innocent and the guilty, the rich and the poor. (Sigh.)

Hmmmm, it's almost time for me to rise from the Slumber of 2025; my platform is coming up. I'm around if you need my service. Here, take my business card, call on me when needed.

* Justice *
Any Address
Any City, Any State, Any Zip
Any number, Any email

***Resting Beneath the Subway Lights,* Gardner LaMarche**

Deep nights are like the train, carrying me into the resting state. Emotions are hidden by the dark. You can't see them but they're in the heart. The greatest journey is the life of one's heart. The subway lights all shine like candles, as I think to myself about the train's dark thoughts. Deep inside the machine believes in its ability to conquer the task. Like the heart, the train is unknowing of its true potential. Will there be a resplendent ending at the course's final destination? Love often becomes a game in the demands of civilization. So many souls searching for what is not connected by the heavenly rails. If I were a machine then love would always be the motivation of my engine. My heart is forever bonded to the railways of the Heaven. Although life is a body of so many different properties, my heart rests in the metal arms of a train whose automatic energy knows only how it feels to accomplish the task of transporting passengers to the destination of their desires. And I wonder if love could ever be so mechanical. The heart is a fantastic highway with infinite vestiges, each one holding different rewards. And the train makes love within the trails of an industrial pathway. And my love envies the machine's successes, its ability to achieve, to support its counterparts with determination. If only love could be so efficient.

***Nikita / Nikki,* Gary Farlow**

Things were so different now. Fleeing the advancing invasion of foreign troops, Nikita, her mom and younger brother and sister traveled first to Poland, then on to New York.

Leaving behind her father, older brother, and uncle Vanya, Nikita suddenly found herself "head" of the family. At just 19, she had become proficient in English at the urging of her father, Ilya, who told his daughter, "you're going to need it." Truer words had never been spoken.

Nikita's mother, Arushka, had never learned English, and was totally lost amidst the hustle and bustle of the Big Apple. She had withdrawn into their fourth-floor walkup in Brooklyn and Nikita had taken two jobs, done all the shopping, escorted her siblings to their pre-school, plus taken classes at City College.

My god, she was exhausted.

"Mama," Nikita urged her mother. "Please, just go outside. We are in America now. It is safe. You can go to the Ukrainian Center. They will help you—us."

But Arushka just shook her head, still wearing the blue-and-gold kerchef, muttering "nyet": "no."

The war at home dragged on. The front lines writhed to and fro like a snake, hiding the hundreds—thousands—of men and boys, even women now, dying in defense of villages just rubbled under the unrelenting assault of a superior force.

She laid her head against the cool glass of the subway on the ride to Brooklyn from Manhattan. Nimita, now known as "Nikki" to her American peers, thought, "If I could just rest." But she had far too much to do.

None of her new American friends seemed to grasp what was at stake in Nikki's homeland. Did they honestly think that the aggression would end if Kyiv fell? Did Hitler stop after annexing Austria? Or the Sudetenland? Or all of the former Czechoslovakia? Just as in 1939, it wouldn't end now unless it was met with equal force.

History was repeating itself. Nikki's mother had not received a letter [addressed to Nikki] from either her father, brother Gregory, or uncle Vanya in nearly three months. They feared the worst and Nikki went each afternoon to light a candle at the tiny Ukrainian Orthodox Church for their men.

Alighting from the subway, Nikki approached the brownstone that housed her family. On the steps were several social workers from the Ukrainian Relief Center and Father Dimitri of the church.

One of the women took Nikki's trembling hands. "Nikkita, I am sorry…" but she got no further as Nikki collapsed in sobs, taken into the arms of the priest as he muttered comforting words in Ukrainian. Falling to the wet pavement was the letter bearing the Seal of the Republic of the Ukraine.

"It is with profound sadness that we inform you that Ilya, Gregory, and Vanya Piecynski were killed in action along the frontlines of the Crimea. They gave their lives in defence of Ukrainian freedom. All are being awarded Medals of Valor posthumously."

March Picture Theme



***Busy And Highly Congested*, David Lee Wilson**

If our hearts and minds could be described in a photograph…this is mine.

Here this young woman is at rest and still, she is in transit.

We see her precious, peaceful, and beautiful presence reflecting a similar, but dimmer and more transparent version of itself, like a twin in a dualistic landscape.

The train also shares a dimmer shadow of itself in a landscape mirroring our own.

Which is true and which one isn't?

***On the Nod,* Belinda Ladd**

My daily metro ride takes thirty-five minutes from home to campus. Six hours later and it's another twenty-minute ride to get to work, and then eight hours after that I have a forty-minute ride back to my apartment. In a short seven hours I will do it again, and again, and again. Three more years and I'll graduate with a degree in forestry, then hopefully I can get a job in Colorado. If I save up, and maybe take a weekend job, I might even be able to buy a Jeep. But for now, it isn't practical to own a vehicle. There is too much stuff like monthly payments, insurance, maintenance costs, charging station fees, tickets, and parking spaces in the city are premium, not to mention that cars are frequently stolen, vandalized, or crashed into. I'm not going to get caught up in that cycle.

I've trained myself to cat-nap while the transit system gets me from place to place. I

used to try to multitask with my laptop or look at my phone, but somebody is always interrupting me. Mostly just being friendly, but then there are the creeps who try so hard to convince you that they are not, and that you should drop everything and go where they're going. No thanks. Usually folks won't interrupt if you're sleeping. Strange how I have become conditioned. It's as if my mind and body know the route, know the repetition sways and bumps along the way, and I've never missed my stop. My brain just goes off-line for a while and then I open my eyes and it's time to get off. I think I have a sixth sense too, because normal sounds and people talking don't disturb me, but like if somebody is staring at me, I'll just know it and wake up.

Those short little dream sessions rest my body and feed my soul. I usually find myself hiking a path lined with tundra-grass high in the Rocky Mountains, or riding a horse in a Telluride meadow, and even sometimes skiing the advanced trails with tiny icicles in my nose and a mug of hot chocolate waiting for me at the lodge. There are so many blue sky vistas that it is unbelievable. I'm going to be there for reals one day, and I'll have that new Jeep too. You'll see.

***Night to Day, to Day to Night*, Leonard Ortiz Jr.**

Exhaustion. It's not your friend, trust me. I hate being tired, especially when you still have more to do.

After work you see someone tired, trying to relax, only to have to work again when you get home...

Single mothers and fathers, parents —working from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. then from 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. Working more than one could imagine! Dally, being overworked trying to provide only the best for their children. If you've never been a parent, just ask your own.

Those years, from birth to 13 or 14 years old are crucial developmental years. Children need caring, nurturing, love, to foster a good upbringing. To do so, parents broke their backs to do everything they could. Here, in the 21st century, raising beautiful offspring isn't easy.

So, when you see someone nod off on the bus, train, or even car, remember, they could be resting for their next job. Pray for them, pray to God to take way their stress and give them strength and energy...Lord knows they need it.

***To a Young Girl*, Omar Recalde**

I failed you. When I saw you sleeping on the L train going into Manhattan, 1 or 2 in the morning, I could've said something, done something for you.

Hey, you OK?
Are you high?
Do you need a place to crash?
I think you missed your stop.
Why is there a teddy bear on the seat next to you?
Is sleeping on the train, alone, young, defenseless, safer than home?

In the edited past, I keep imagining that I say something, or at least take your picture. Sometimes we become friends for a New York minute. Sometimes I perpetuate the pain you're running from. Sometimes I'm a hero, sometimes not.

Where are you now? Are you still running?

Are you standing in a field, breathing fresh air, a grown woman with an easy smile?

Are you cold and not any older than when I saw you?

I'm sorry.

***Untitled*, Charles Whitfield**

Who amongst ourselves hasn't been in this situation before like this lady on the subway (or bus, train), totally wiped out, catching a much-needed kip*.

There's no shame in catching a cat-nap (especially if you're in class and you've got a professor who's so boring, even the chalk and books fall asleep) for your body, your brain needs to recharge its batteries.

A 3-to-5 minute catnap's a blessing...not to be laughed at. People who are industrious aren't ashamed to catch kips when your body tells you it's time you take one.

*British phrase meaning sleep or nap

***I'm Beat*, Jack Simpson**

Today I woke up at 4:30 AM. Hit the alarm and took a hot shower. Two slices of toast, a glass of juice and headed to work. Ten hours working in the hospital takes a toll on anyone. Things started off fine. Four hours into my shift, I had changed uniforms three times. From gunshot wounds, car wrecks, and other problems. It wouldn't look too well with blood all over me.

In the last hour of my shift, I had a chance to take a thirty-minute nap. At 6 PM I signed out and headed to my night classes at the local college. I had taken a course to get credit to finish college courses in medical training. I really wanted to be a doctor. At present I had to go for "nurse practitioner".

Class over with, I still had to go home. Get a shower, cram for a test and still have time to sleep, trying to rest on the commuter train is so unlikely. Too many people up to no good. My purse slung from my shoulder and yes, I sure am packing.

As my eyes closed on the train all I could think was sleep is well welcomed. If I could hold out for three more months, I would finish all the classes and would be able to graduate.

Until I finish, my body will have to be pushed. Little sleep and little food. One thing that will always be in my mind: I am beat.

***Untitled,* Jacob Lester**

The day has left me exhausted. The twists and turns, the shouts and demands, all draining my energy. Resting my head, I close my eyes and let the world pass by. So much to do still yet, but for now a rest I will catch. Maybe by this ride's end, I will feel ready for what next comes my way.

***The Door of Opportunity,* Karla Wooten**

When one door closes another one opens.
When one door opens another one closes.
The Door of Opportunity is the one that you choose- so choose wisely, use discretion, pray to the God that lives, that sees everything that abides in Eternity which is the Heavens.
Pray to God that you will not choose the wrong door. The wrong door can leave you desperate, devastated and poor.
The wrong door can leave you crying, dying, and the victim of endless drama, the victim of endless stress and trauma.
The wrong door can leave you at the mercy of Drama Queens and Drama Kings, who will not stop lying.
The Door of Opportunity should be one that makes you Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise, it should cause you to be restored, redeemed, and transform your life.
When the Door of Opportunity is presented to you, there will be multiple doors that are presented to you- be careful and wise about the Door you choose.

***Asleep on the Train,* Jeffery Shockley**

Resting my eyes I slip into this abyss of time defined by the reflection of myself.

How long could I ride before anyone questions if I am dead or alive?

As comfort finds me in this uncomfortable existence heeding no resistance to where I am going or wherever I may have been released from. It is questioned- am I symbolic of death's last ride as I try to live beside myself, reflectively speaking?

The weight of my life split through, looking in on myself under the rattle and jostling I have become used to. Some call it life.

Am I some lost soul ignored by those around? Bound to places unheard of and yet all so familiar as we are all travelling somewhere. Getting to or coming from. Here, for the moment I rest in the reflection of who I still can't see.

***Woman Sleeping On Subway*, Bonnelle Vang**

Your head falls and rests
On the window
Of the subway train.
Your eyes aren't open
But I know your mind is wide –
Inviting old memories to form
The haunted dreams
Of yesterday
Speeding at three thousand miles per hour
We run, to and fro,
Away and from,
Closer and nearer,
Further and farther
To the nightlife city
Of future possibilities;
Escaping the realities
That bound us from becoming infinities.

***Untitled*, Vinicio J. Garcia**

girl asleep on public transportation
with 8 billion people on earth you'd
better watch out where you sleep.

***Marsha: Train Resting Woman*, Quentric Williams**

How are you feeling today Ms. Lady? My name is Q. I've seen you on this bus route before. At the moment I live in Hong Kong. I had to come back to the States due to internet failure; the Chinese government said because of the war that all American citizens would be in danger.

So here I am looking for two jobs; already I have two interviews today: one at Chic-fil-A and the one I'm on my way to, Krystaks.

I should be on my feet in a year or two, at least able to to be able to start saving for a car. Wait, don't say much. Let me see what I can predict about you. Single mother, upper-middle class, tech degree, two or three cars. But you travel public transit because you live and work on the same block; if not the same, then it's the next one over. No purse is present, so it must be in the car with the person that is following you. Before I made it to you on the train, people were already telling me to look!!!

Because you work nearby, you have to be involved with computers, you have at least one pet, and if you point to which building I can tell you exactly what it is that you work on. All day long for 12 hours. You must have some foreign DNA or you have been to the beach or salon a month ago. I'll wait to feel comfortable about our friendship. By then we will be seen together at many sports events, and sometime after, a vacation. When the war is over you should come visit me in the valley. That's the way that China is set up: you have your hills and mountains. I'm on the northside of the valley looking toward the phone towers. You can't miss it. Soon after I graduate with my double Master's in robotic technology and AI manufacturing. I'll be able to hire you to work in my office space.

I want to manufacture robots. The science to the equation that I need to install in you is that in order to get a manufacturing license, you have to be able to prove that your prototype is family-friendly. All I do all day is build and rebuild robots. I've never seen them haywire and harm a human, but I have seen them lift cars and climb telephone poles for repair. Now how close am I to the truth?

***She Don't Love Me Anymore*, Nkrumah Lumumba Valier**

I can still feel the love I once had for you
deep within my heart.
It still lives because it was real.
In the abyss of my soul.
I can hear the echoes of it calling out your name
in pain.
The sound of a tortured soul living in hell.
What you left me feeling, living without you in my
life.
Haunted by the times we once shared in my
dreams.
Happier times within my beautiful Islam Quran.
I try to avoid thinking about you
and I never say your name.
Because the pain always makes me cry.
A pain that's so strong
once made me attempt suicide.
Screaming she doesn't love me anymore!
As the tears kept falling from my eyes.
Your love was the only power keeping me alive.

Without your love I wanted to die.
The breakup between us, left me broken.
Half of the man I used to be.
Because you were the other half that made me complete.
It's like a blessing Allah gave me was taken away.
Now some other man is receiving all the blessings that was once meant for me.
Do you love him?
Or do you just need him to get over me?
Things that don't last,
were not meant to be.
I sometimes fantasize of us reuniting in the future.
Now knowing how to love each other the right way.
Learning from our past mistakes we both made.
I wish I could erase the pain away.
But our hearts won't forget all we have been through together.
Maybe it's better off this way.
We need to go our separate ways.
So the healing will start,
That will let our love pains fade away.
I thought being with a Muslim woman would be different.
Danish you made me cry.
Danish doesn't love me anymore!
But my heart won't let her go.
You broke me.
Too damaged to ever love another woman.
She doesn't love me anymore!
I lost my Danish.
She don't love me anymore!
She don't love me anymore!
Wondering if it is me that you are dreaming about in your sleep?
Hoping when the train stops and you wake up,
it's me that you are on the way to see.
I will do whatever you want me to.
I belong to you.
We belong together, forever.
I just need you to love me again.
Find it in your heart to forgive me
for what I did to make you leave me.
I promise I will never break your heart again.
I love you Danish.
I'm sorry baby.
I'm hurting without you.
I just want to live again.
I can't do without you being in my life.
Please help me live again...
She don't love me anymore!
She don't love me anymore!

***Too Much*, Raquel Hernandez**

Too much noise.
Too much head counts
Too much to accomplish
    before my end date from prison.
I sit back and think
    will I have enough?
Will I have enough time to get
    everything done?
I try not to make
     my schedule too much.
When I take a look
    at my planner
There's just too much
on my calendar.

Too much!

***Going Places*, Robert Barlett**

The Blue Line is almost 70 miles long. It runs fairly straight through the northwest quarter of the capital and the suburbs. It makes a few oblique turns between farms and ranches in the unincorporated area of the country. Then it winds its way through the jungle to the coast, coiling and spiraling like a snake. There were three sets of tracks. Originally, there was a fourth set for the first two miles, in the downtown area of the city, but that was before the Americans imposed tariffs and threatened to set up an embargo.

As the economy crashed, railroad tracks were torn up and melted down. After the Americans bombed the Tunnel last year, only a few local trains ran on limited schedules. The excavation took two months. One set of tracks was back in service; the other two were still unsafe.

The 6:00 p.m. northbound train used to make the entire run, end to end, in about 85 minutes; but it wasn't an express train anymore. There would not be any more express trains on the line in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, there were no more whistle stops, either. Increased traffic in drugs and guns from the U.S. had led to increased violence and gang activity, so the rural facilities were unsafe, particularly at night.

There is only one passenger on the train tonight. She finished her homework, studied the

quantum mathematics chapter—well, most of it—in her math textbook, then fell asleep somewhere in the Tunnel. She hated that part of the trip, and was happy to have slept through the worst of it.

She thinks she had a dream. Yes, she did—a very pleasant one. She's had a thing for Javier since Junior High School. He took her to the Prom and she'd planned to let him enjoy some benefits of their relationship, but it never happened.

They both wanted to—you know, "do it." Neither of them chickened out, exactly. Things just didn't play out in real life the way they had in her dreams. She'd met some handsome, well-hung jocks in college. Some had gotten their hand under her blouse or even into her pants, but they were not Javier.

She would probably see him in the summer. He'd probably ask her out. She made up her mind. She'll let him take her someplace nice; she'll wear a loose dress with no bra or panties; and she won't let him get away without her cherry.

She doesn't know about the American military action a couple of hours ago. They kidnapped the president, killed 81 people and wounded hundreds more. She'll graduate next year. Her diplomas and degrees won't do her much good and she'll never see Javier again.

***Untitled*, Ryan Lapp**

This picture worries me, sets my anxiety to a high level; I am concerned for her safety. Sleeping on an RT train or subway train in my hometown of Sacramento, CA, is not something that is wise to do. Sacramento is the Capital of Cali and it is a beautiful city; it is filled with good people for the most part. The minority group of people, though smaller in numbers, are really bad and they prey on people like the woman in the photo.

All of that aside, I wonder what she is dreaming of? Perhaps she is awash in memories from the past, a time when our country was a democratic state and not an outright shitshow. If you have read any of my writing then you already know that I am very anti-Trump the chump. I suppose my thoughts and therefore my words on the page are biased; for all I know she could be dreaming of any number of things that have nothing to do with politics.

Whatever she may or may not be dreaming of she looks like she is happy; perhaps she is heading home to relax after a long work week and getting a head start. I know for a fact that the next train I am on will not feature me sleeping. I will be on my way home from High Desert State Prison; I couldn't sleep if I wanted due to all of the sounds I will no doubt be hearing, sounds I have not heard in almost a decade, sounds I took for granted before.

The fact that I enjoy vacationing on train trips in the free world will make this homecoming extra special. I hope that AmTrak still serves alcohol on their longer trips, cuz I'm gonna need a few Corona or Modelo beers, and a few tequila shots. Not too much though; I don't want to fall asleep.

P.S. In the first paragraph I mentioned the minority group of people. This group of people are the predators, gang members, and other low-life people who victimize innocent citizens in Sacramento. I want to make it clear that I am not referring to ethnic minority groups. That being said I'm signing off.

***She is*, Brix Capone**

I have known this gorgeous woman for eleven years. She's not my woman but she's my woman. I sit across from her, staring at her while she rests her beautiful blue eyes, admiring her beauty wondering what she's thinking or dreaming about. She is so exhausted because she overexerts herself just to make sure everyone else is good. She's not even the oldest of her siblings, yet, just like me she is the "keeper" of her family. This is why we are drawn together. We have a lot of similarities. I find myself constantly wanting to hold her and take care of her. Both her parents died and instead of her older siblings taking on all the responsibilities, it was all left on her shoulders. Is that what she thinks about when she closes her eyes? I want to help her carry some of what's on her shoulders but she's too independent and "Don't need nobody"," but that's bullshit, we all NEED somebody. She works TWO jobs, is raising two daughters, helps her grandparents and younger siblings every time they ask. But when she does ask them for help, they complain and make her feel like shit. She doesn't ask me for help often because she doesn't want me

to think she's weak, I'd never think that! But I'd ALWAYS help her without complaint if she'd ask, but she rarely does. She is stubborn, it took me almost an hour to get her to agree to come with me today, I wouldn't tell her where I'm taking her.

"Kristyn, we're at the station," I said soft enough not to startle her but loud enough for it to register. I watch her as she stretches and yawns. "You're so beautiful," I say knowing she hates being admired.

“Shut up," she says, smiling. We've expressed being in love with one another but put no labels on anything because she has too much going on and I understand that so I don't push the issue. I will wait as long as I have to. "Where are we, Capone?" she asks looking around the Station, "Bloomington-normal, come on, our ride is waiting outside.”

The black sedan drops us off in a very large almost empty corn field. "Come on.” I grab her hand.

"Is this where I die?” she jokes which is something hurt people do a lot of to mask the damage.

"No baby, we're going to release all of the negative energy and stress. We have to make room for the positive energy trying to fill us up." I walk her to the middle of the field and I let her hand go, positioning my feet in a strong balanced position on the ground. I put my hands around my mouth and shout, "I hate that you made me feel unloved as a kid but I forgive you!" It was a loud angry scream at mother and then I hear Kristyn yell next to me a high -pitched scream followed by the words:

“You fucking assholes left me with EVERYTHING! I want to forgive you - but - but- I don't know h-" her shout fell silent. When I turned to check on her she was on her knees in an "ugly-cry” that hurt my heart. I dropped down next to her, put my arm around her and held her "I-I-I don't know how," she cried.

"It's okay, let it out... Let it all go. Just say “I forgive you” and move on.

We stood slowly and she shouted at her parents with tears still falling, "I forgive you!” She turned to me with her head down, I held her hands.

“Let me help you?” I asked.

She looked at me licking away tears, "how?"

"Let me help you carry your burdens?"

She looked at the sky and asked me, "why?"

"Because I love you and I don't want you to stress yourself sick.” Our eyes met and she nodded her head slowly. But a nod doesn't always mean yes, so I asked "Can I help you?"

She stood on her tippy toes, gave me a kiss and whispered, "Yes."

She is a good woman, she is the "Keeper" of her family. She is a queen. She is strong. She is stubborn. She is tired. She is gorgeous. She is smart. She isn't my woman, but she is my woman, She is mine!

If You Ever Loved Me (“an Open Letter”), Terance DeJuan Wilson

The discipline of life is to see things from a woman’s point of view.
Born with nothing to lose; a lioness in the gait of her youth
Searching a truth; a beautiful flower in the girth of her bloom
Her textures in full blossom; she’s not what you’d assume
She’s tall with European features; blessed with the mint of a Goddess
Her languid brown eyes emphasize the scale of her knowledge
The most difficult thing about the past is all that it takes to walk away
I’ve seen pictures from my own wake – how they treat you when you’re gone
Flames of retribution frame your silhouette on the walls
Stealing pages from our catalogue: winter; spring; summer; fall
Dates that I recall that I’d have been better off alone
The interplay of thoughts mixed with fumes of alcohol,
Perusing the thoughts of some of the most beautiful women in the world,
She wanted to be more than an actress; she wanted to influence fashion
With a passion for telling stories that some would judge without a rational–
mind. In a room where only intellects could interpret the way we worship
I told you my woes; then you smiled and said that, ‘No one’s perfect’
I never did doubt; in fact, I knew that we would make it out,
All of the pressure on you, suddenly our love is in dispute
No amount could account for these trips to the fountain of youth;
Time always subdues. Seduced by the intrigues of a phantom muse

Then the future intrudes and I cannot escape the algorithms of your blues
The conditions of you, beauty like rivers you move through me
Facilitated by the flashing lights; the truth is that I never felt so safe to see the world from a woman's perspective; Paris, France, with a midnight curfew
You in blue jeans, shirt untucked, our heads tossed back staring at the skies
Of a grey night; from the moment our hands touched we were made allies
Funny things happen when a woman splits a man in two;
Conflict will turn a boy into a man to get the world to understand you
What is a past life? – Like the inkling that somehow, somewhere we've been here before
What is a paramour? – Like love that hinders, or winters that turn into war
At the end of life's commission, consider my initial conditions;
I entered life without a vision, but I made it out of every transition.
For such a time as this I must submit the art of choosing.
From a lion's perspective; ascending the throne.
Locked inside a beautiful prison I get imposter syndrome;
In a compassionate mood, last night, interpreting you, beauty
The study of our bodies driven apart; to every war there is a pristine art
Or the the perfect collision; my defense in a series called, 'Missing You,'
Love letters; heart matters: There is no addiction like trust.
A quiet spell, I consider life when I wasn't doing so well;
Under a silent veil, I found beauty inside the presence of an awkward girl;
Before life made her complicated, I would steal her smile;
I would impress it on the pages of my drawing paper
I had a way with art; I could arrange people, places;
I could conjure up whatever sitting on concrete stages
And there was always a purpose for me; a boy encouraged to dream
I could be whoever, whatever I wanted to be
I could leverage dreams. I was meant to be attached to someone else's destiny,
Be it desperately.
Who knew she'd become so demanding?
When things change there is no ostentatious display of circumstances.
They just do. I'm used to operating from a sheltered point of view.
Now I'm troubled by things other people say; things they do
We've become cutthroats; in the end where does the love go?
How do you condition humans like this? Opposites forced to co-exist?
All of my life AFRAID of the things that I might lose,
Never did I imagine that you would be you, different from the others
It was my pleasure to witness you grow, Mr. beautiful You,
The one that I gave my heart, body, mind and soul to
You were exceptional, nothing. Like what I'd assumed,
So, if you ever loved me,
Give yourself the grace to grow….

***Train Ride*, Howard Brown**

Cina rode the downtown train, after a tiresome day at work. She planned to just rest her head on the window frame. But, the rhythmic sound and vibrations of the train lulled her to sleep. Such a sight of a beautiful girl could inspire lyrics in a song.

What came to mind is "Downtown Train" by Tom Waits. A great version, but in prison I mostly hear male voices. Thus, I got the cover "Downtown Train" by Patty Smyth from "Downtown Train". I played it on a loop to find these lyrics.

"The downtown trains are filled with all those Brooklyn girls. They try so hard to break out of their little worlds."

"Will I see you tonight on a downtown train? Every night is just the same, it leaves me lonely."

Not sure what a Brooklyn girl looks like. Anyways it's been an interesting evening imagining Gina sleeping on a downtown train.

"Wil I see Gina some night, on a downtown train? Only after events go right, I'll lose a ball and chain."

Upcoming Word Themes:

- **Due August 1 2026:** “Into the Unknown”
- **Due September 1 2026**: “Names”

Upcoming Picture Themes:

Due 8/1/26:



Due 9/1/26:



Word & Picture Theme Guidelines

Use our word and picture "theme" prompts as a starting point to get your creative juices flowing! Send us your writing for a chance to be included in our Prisoner Express Theme Anthologies. When sending in your work, please be mindful of these guidelines:

1.) **Word Theme** submissions must be **nonfiction** (true stories or your thoughts/beliefs).

2.) **Picture Theme** submissions can be **fiction OR nonfiction.**

3.) **Your writing should be semi-cohesive and *clearly relate to the theme*** consistently throughout the essay or story. The reader should be able to generate a connection between your writing and the themes at hand.

4.) On the first page of your submission, ***please clearly indicate which month and theme*** (picture or word) your submission is for.

5.) **Please include your name & page number(s)** on EVERY PAGE of your submission.

Your first and last name; OR your pen name; OR your first and last name with a clear note that you wish the piece to be attributed to "Anonymous." (When using a pen name, keep in mind that if your piece is published to our website, people will not be able to respond to you as they won't be able to look up your address.) ***Page numbers*** are very important if there are more than one!

6.) Please **write legibly.** If we can't read your writing, we can't transcribe and print it.

7.) Please keep your entry to ***800 words maximum.***

Send your submissions to:

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Ithaca NY 14851

OR email them to:
PrisonerExpressThemes@Gmail.com.

Contact us with any questions.

Please note! Submissions will not be included in the anthology if they do not follow the guidelines.

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